

t h e B e a u t i f u l W o r l d



Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. 17

by Keiichi Sigsawa

[Novel Updates](#)

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キノの旅XVII
the Beautiful World

エルメスが強奪された……。『新しいあなたになりませんか？ 新しいあなたになれます！ 私達と！ ——“人生の真実を見つけるホウデンの会”』。エルメスを奪った者たちは、怪しげなテレビCMを放送する宗教団体のメンバーだった。しかし、その国には彼らのような宗教団体を手厚く保護する法律があつて……。『神のいない国』
その他、2013年4月より新聞紙上でウィークリー連載された話題の小説&イラストも完全収録！ 書き下ろし8話を含む全18話という、シリーズ史上最大のボリュームでお贈りする「キノの旅」17巻。



し-8-41
キノの旅XVII
the Beautiful World
時雨沢恵一
電撃文庫



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海の中で見る風景
もどきめいろう
時雨沢恵一
1972年に生まれたと思う。2000年に電撃文庫でデビューしたと思う。2013年の今、それなりに仕事も振っていると思う。嬉しいと思う。もっと行こうと思う。何処に行くのかと思う。何処に行けるのかと思う。何処に行つたとしても、私はそこにいると思う。
【電撃文庫作品】
キノの旅Ⅰ～XVII the Beautiful World
学園キノ①～⑤
アリソン
アリソンⅡ 真珠の夜の夢
アリソンⅢ（下） 隠謀という名の列車
リリアとレイズⅠ・Ⅱ そして二人は旅行に行った（上）（下）
リリアとレイズⅢ・Ⅳ クエストへの一番長い道（上）（下）
リリアとレイズⅤ・Ⅵ 私の王子様（上）（下）
メグとセロンⅠ・Ⅱ 三三の五年の夏休み（上）（下）
メグとセロンⅢ ウレリックスの魔眼
メグとセロンⅣ エアコ村連続殺人事件
メグとセロンⅤ クリーハップバーンの民
メグとセロンⅥ 第四上級学校の日々
メグとセロンⅦ 暗殺者は突然こいつの足が電燈（上）（下）～アツタはどけろはけ（上）（下）とどろき～
イラスト：星屋眞日
プロフィール：いづかかかったからwiki見たら、ジャージマニアってなってたんだけど、私はジャージ好きだけど制服もスクール水着も厚着も薄着も女子なんなんでも好きだぞ！

自分以外の旅人が犠牲になった事件からモトラドで逃げ出して、森の中の軒家、「御座」という正体不明の老翁に助けられて何年かしばらく二人で暮らし、最後にはモトラドのエルメスでこの事件を語る旅に出た『大人の国』出身の若者キノの旅と不思議で驚きに満ちた旅についての記述

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the Beautiful World

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時雨沢恵一

電撃文庫



海外ドラマ「御座」の制作現場

時雨沢恵一

やだもー！
私の事なんて、どうでもいいじゃないですかー！

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅Ⅰ～ⅩⅦ the Beautiful World
学園キノ①～⑤
アリソン
アリソンⅡ 真実の後の夢
アリソンⅢ（上） ホニを車窓から
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メグとセロンⅤ クリー・ハッピーの民
メグとセロンⅥ 市立上級学校の日々
メグとセロンⅦ 暗黒者は突然に
一つの旅の物語(上)(下) →キノの旅(全18話)の17巻

イラスト：黒星紅白

プロフィール：黒星紅白は、ジョージアニアってなってるんだけど、私はジョージア好きだからど国でもスクール水着も洋服も洋服も女子ならなんでも好きです！

キノの旅 XVII

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢恵一

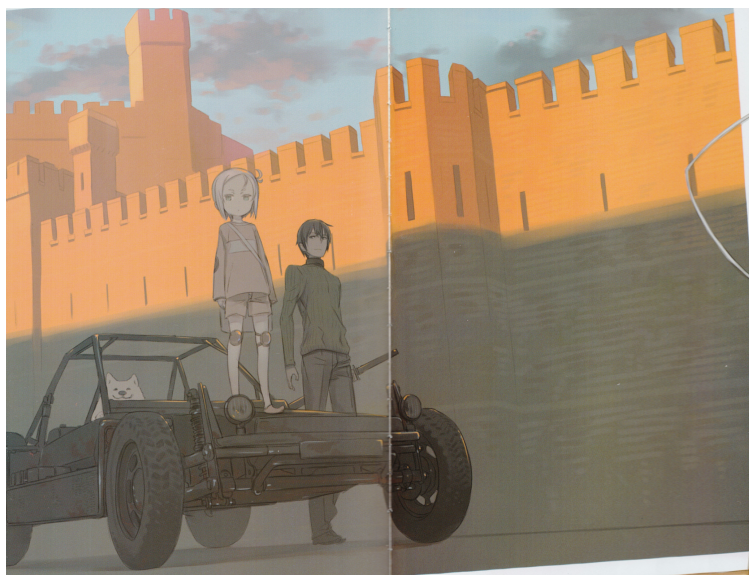
KEIICHI SUGISAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOUTAKI KUROBOSHI





[illegible][illegible][illegible]

こ、松、つ、道、れ、つ、に、受、ち、と、

ブローグ「渡す国・b」—Messenger・b—





「遊んでいる国」 —Invention—

その国は、険しい山と谷しかない山岳国家でした。

節匠と呼ばれる職人の妙齢の女性に、少し背が低くてハンサムな若い男が黄色く赤い水口な車でその国にやってくる。

「やあ！ 旅人さん！ 上から見るとどうですか？ 可愛らしい車だね！」
「こんにちは！ 頭の上から失礼！ もりすく回よ！」
空から話しかけられました。

「節匠、なんですかあれ？」

「見上げる二人の頭の上を、人が飛んでいきます。」

大きな旗を描く布の翼を広げ、翼から延びた綱本ものの細いロープにハリスでぶら下がって、

人が空を飛んでいるのです。よく見ると、谷間には同じように空を飛ぶ人間が二十人くらいいました。

低いところから高いところまで、谷の中を自由に舞っています。それはまるで、鳥のようでした。

「ああ、それはパラグライダー！ ですよ。我が国で発明された道具です！」

到着したホテルで二人は説明を受けました。

「我が国は、急峻な山と谷で、緊急時の交通手段をいっている考えでしたの

です。例えば、急病人が出た時に医者を迅速に送り込む方法です。」

「十年ほど前、二人の天才が、布を背負って斜面を走って、ふわりと浮くことに成功しました。できるだけ長く空中にいられるようにと、改良が進みました。布を大きく細長く、そして楕円形にしたんです。さきほど飛行技術も進歩して、太

場所より高く昇るようになったんです。今では、国と国を結んで、この国の何処であつても、目指す場所に飛んでいけるようになりました。」

ホテルの従業員は、どこか誇らしげに言いました。

「旅人の男がひどく感心しました。素晴らしい発明ですね！ それでこの国は緊急時の行き来が楽になって、より安全に生活しやすくなったんですね！」

「ええ、ええ……まあ……」
先ほどの態度とは裏腹に、そうと目を逸らしました。

「は？ 何か問題でも？」
男が訊ねました。

ホテルの従業員は、恥ずかしげに、小声で答えます。

「ええ、実は、その……発明自体は素晴らしいと思つたんですけど……かなりの国民が空を飛ぶことが面白くて、空を飛んでしまふ、毎日飛んでばかりで働かぬ人が増えて困っているのです……。そろそろ本格的に法律で規制しないと、この国は貧乏ましくなるとはいいかと……」

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Design Yoshitoko Kamabe

キノの旅

— the Beautiful World —

XVII

時雨沢 恵一

Illustration : 黒星紅白

あなたが誰かの手を握って
暖かく感じているとき
その誰かは
冷たく感じている

—We Are All Alone.—



Frontispiece: “Land of Fashion” —Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds.—

It was a country famous for clothes manufacturing.

In this country, various fabrics from cotton to silk are produced in large quantities.

The production of clothes from these fabrics is its largest industry. It is a place where designers and dressmakers get to show off their talents every day.

Traders come from far and wide to take a look at their excellent garments. They are valuable export goods that bring in enormous wealth to the country.

Models are needed to create the catalogue of clothes. And to advertise a huge quantity of clothes, many models are necessary.

And so, all the travelers that come to this country are asked to become models.

In exchange, they will be treated to the country’s most expensive and exquisite meals.

You might think no traveler would take this bait and become a model, but in fact, not a single traveler refused the offer.

Since none of them would stay long in the country anyway, they would have no way of knowing how the pictures turned out. And more importantly, there’s the great food.

As a result, the country’s fashion catalogue is filled with pictures of various travelers.

If you go to their ‘National Museum of Clothing’, you can browse through all the catalogues—even those over a hundred years old— that are being kept in custody there.

And if you look carefully, you might even be able to see some familiar faces.

Prologue: “Land of Passage • b” — Messengers • b —

Upon finishing the exit procedures, Master Shizu returned to the buggy.

And the gates opened with a sluggish thud.

It was unpleasantly cold, but it was a fine morning with not a single cloud visible in the sky.

Master Shizu settled himself on the driver’s seat.

The girl on the passenger seat, Ti, hugged my head tightly, as I was seated in front of her.

Now, let us part with this country and search for one where we can stay.

Master Shizu fastened his seat belt and pushed the buggy’s ignition starter switch.

The vibrating engine at the rear of the vehicle let out a resounding, harmonious hum.

As if it possessed a will, and yearned to run and go places.

At that moment,

“Traveler! Wait!”

Someone’s yelling voice. And the indistinct, dry sound of a different engine.

As there was no one else before the gates during that morning, the voice, without a doubt, was calling out to Master Shizu.

“Traveler!”

The girl’s voice came louder than before.

Master Shizu stopped in the middle of placing his hand on the gear.

“Traveler! Oh, thank goodness I got here on time!”

Along with the feeble sputter of an engine, a motorrad and the girl that rode

it appeared.

The girl stopped the motorrad next to the buggy, alighted, and rushed over to the buggy's driver seat where Master Shizu is.

And then,

“Please take this!”

The object she was handing over was a slightly biggish paper envelope.

Master Shizu took it, removed his gloves, and extracted its contents with his bare hands.

“This... it's amazing.”

What he was looking at, and what he showed to me and Ti, was a photograph.

A colored photograph with incredibly vivid hues.

In front of the walls that was dyed orange thanks to the evening sun, Master Shizu stood next to the buggy, Ti stood above the car's hood, while I peeked from the passenger seat.

It was focused perfectly, a truly splendid photo.

Master Shizu turned with a smile to the girl, and said,

“Thank you. This will make a very good remembrance. This country is wonderful.”

The gates opened fully, and a loud buzzer sounded.

It was a signal for us to leave immediately, as the gates should be shut soon.

“Everyone, please take care!”

That was all of the conversation with the girl.

Master Shizu pulled the gear, and the buggy took off.

And then we passed through the gates.

—

Mixed with the running sound of the buggy, I heard a faint click of a shutter.

That girl probably took one.

A photograph that we will never be able to see.

And as to what manner we, along with that picture, will be remembered in this country—

Surely, Master Shizu will never be able to ascertain. However—

I'm sure he regrets nothing.

Frontispiece 2: “Land of Play” —Invention—

It was a country in a mountainous region with nothing but steep peaks and valleys.

Once, a youthful black-haired woman called Master and a slightly short but handsome young man arrived in this country in a rundown yellow car.

“Hey travelers! You know, that cute little car of yours looks like a toy from above!”

“Hello there! Excuse us for talking to you from up here! You will reach the town soon!”

They were met with greetings from the sky.

“Master, what are those?”

“No idea.”

The two were looking up at people who were flying over their heads.

They used a contraption with an enormous outspread arc-shaped wing made of cloth.

From this wing extended numerous thin ropes, at the end of which is a harness with which the person is suspended, enabling him to soar calmly in the sky.

Upon looking closer, twenty or so people flying in the air in a similar manner could be seen in the valley.

They flew high and low, dancing within the valley unfettered just like birds.

—

“Ah, those are ‘paragliders’. It’s a device invented in our country.”

The pair received this explanation at the hotel they arrived at.

“As you can see, there is nothing but steep roads in this country. For a long time, we devised various ways of transportation for use in times of difficulty.

For example, when sending people to the doctors during an emergency,” a hotel employee explained.

“About ten years ago, a genius discovered by pure accident that he could float if he ran through a slope while carrying a cloth behind him. After that, improvements were made to make the duration of the flight as long as possible. The cloth was built bigger and longer, and it was made into an elliptical shape. Aviation techniques further progressed, and we were able to ascend to places higher than where we jumped off, to where we could feel the warmth of the sun and the breeze. Soon we could fly to any place we aim for,” the hotel employee said somewhat proudly.

The male traveler was greatly impressed.

“What a wonderful invention! And so, it became easier to come and go during times of emergency, and everyone in this country lived with peace in their minds, eh?”

“W-well..., yes...”

In response to this praise, the hotel employee only averted his gaze, rather contrary to his attitude only moments ago.

“Hmm? Is there a problem?” the man asked.

The hotel employee answered with a small voice, as if embarrassed,

“Well the truth is... even though we believe the invention itself to be very useful, most of the citizens were so fascinated with the skies that they became hooked with flying. People who would do nothing but fly every day and refuse to go to work have been increasing lately... If the law doesn’t regulate things soon, this country will probably fall into destitution in no time.”

Author's Notes: Afterword —Preface—

Hello to all you readers. This is the author, Sigsawa Keiichi.

This is the start of the four-page afterword from here on.

I'm sure some of you will think, "You can't call something that goes before the text an 'afterword,' can you?" but I don't mind, so I hope you won't mind either.

Of course, there won't be a single spoiler here. Don't be afraid to keep reading this.

Now then, let's begin the afterword.

—

If you're wondering why the afterword is at the beginning this time, it's because I have something I want to explain.

There's something about this volume 17 that's differs from "Kino no Tabi" up to this point.

That being that "'Kino no Tabi' has been serialized in a newspaper, and those stories appear here."

Beginning in April, 2013, at a pace of one-a-week, it's been serialized, mostly in local papers. This is the first attempt with the so-called "light novel" genre, so I'm very honored.

So I received the serialization, and in autumn of last year (2012), I thought, "I can't afford even a chance of failing to meet the serialization in April, so I'll hurry up and write the next Kino from January to March." However, the work I had to finish before that, "The Story of One Continent (Part 2)," dragged on... so I didn't start writing Kino until the middle of February.

I barely finished the "Kino no Tabi" serialization work, and then I immediately had to start working on the stuff for Bunko, so for the first half of 2013, I was busier than I've ever been before. There was no "Gakuen Kino" this year again, and that's the reason why, so I hope you'll wait just a little bit longer.

—

This was, of course, the first time I had ever had something published in a weekly newspaper serialization.

It was stressful, but interesting.

The stressful part was the line length.

The newspaper had strictly defined constraints on the size of each article, so every time, I had to adjust my writing so there wasn't a single line out of place. Normally, I just write without even paying attention to the page count, but here I had to adjust the line lengths like it was a puzzle.

The interesting part was having a stopping point each week.

That's it for this week! What will happen next week? — Making a "cliffhanger" to raise the readers' anticipation was fun and a really nice experience.

—

The serialized stories are compiled here in order.

Also, there are fractions like (2/4) inserted in the text. In that case, it would mean it's the second part of a four-week story. They range from short stories that ended in one week to one that took six weeks.

The other chapters were written in the usual way.

Since volume 17 here contains those serialized chapters, it's thicker than any of the previous volumes. This is probably the first and last time we'll get such a thick Kino.

—

It's 2013.

If you happen to have volume 7, from 2003, with you, please open it to the last page of the color frontispiece. There should be an "Afterword" there too. [\[1\]](#)

There, I wrote the answers to the questions I made for myself ten years in the past, when I came up with the sample for Kino.

Ten years have passed since then.

—

My dream from 2003, "an afterword anime," still hasn't come true —

In the last ten years, I have published books as an author, I've been able to live off of those earnings, and despite having had a serious injury, I'm in great health and I'm very happy.

—

With one of my other series, "Alilson," "Lillia and Treize," and "Meg and Seron," I was able to finish another entry this year, "The Tale of a Single Continent."

From now on, I'd like to continue writing new stories for the "Kino no Tabi" and "Gakuen Kino" series.

Now, I wonder where I'll be and what I'll be doing ten years from now, in 2023?

I want to keep working hard as an author in the future, too.

Everyone, I hope you'll continue to stay with me for a long time to come.

—

Well now, this was a much more serious afterword than usual.

Since it was so serious, is there some sort of "alternate afterword" on the back of the cover?

No, there isn't!

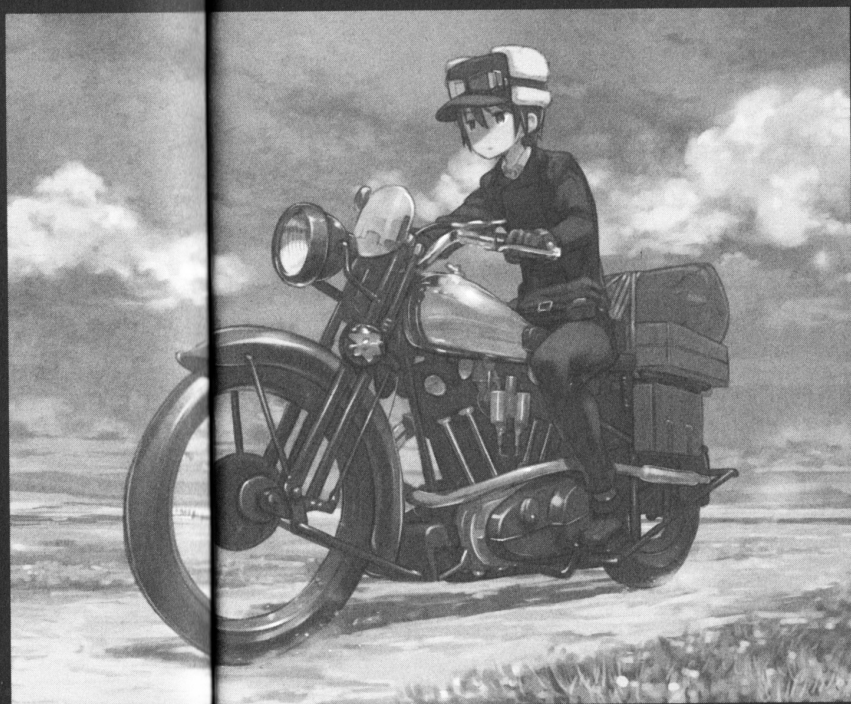
Sigsawa Keiichi.

October, 2013.

Translator's Notes

1. https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Kino_no_Tabi:Volume7_Author%27s_Notes

第一話
「旅人達の話」
— Kino & Hermes —



Chapter 1: “A Tale of Travelers” —Kino & Hermes—

(1/1)[\[1\]](#)

There was a single road in the middle of a prairie.

The brown road stood out amidst the early summer grass that stained the ground a dazzling green. It was made of hardened earth, extending straight in the east-west direction.

And on this road ran a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly.)

The black lustre of its engine shone beneath its silver tank. Two black boxes adorned both sides of its rear wheel, on top of which was a carrier tied with a satchel and a rolled sleeping bag.

The one driving this motorrad packed with travel luggage was a young person who looked to be in her teens. Her black hair framed a face that held a fearless expression.

She wore a black jacket fastened at the waist with a wide belt. On top of her head was a brimmed hat with flaps that were fixed by the band of the goggles on her face.

A hand persuader (Note: A Persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) holster could be seen from her thigh. Inside it was a revolver.

“Kino, slow down a bit.”

The motorrad spoke. The person called Kino asked back as she loosened the accelerator in her right hand.

“What is it Hermes? Did you spot a delicious animal ahead?”

The motorrad called Hermes answered Kino’s question.

“Um, I can’t tell if it’s delicious or not.”

“Well, that’s because you’re a motorrad, Hermes.”

“That’s true, but it’s something not even *you* can eat, Kino. Just a little bit ahead of us, there’s a collapsed human.”

“I see... Okay, we should be careful not to run over him, then.”

Kino proceeded along while riding Hermes at a slower pace.

Eventually, Kino was also able to see it.

A man lay flat on the left side of the road. He didn’t budge one bit even though the sound of Hermes’ engine reverberated noisily.

After stopping Hermes in front of the man, she stopped his engine and brought down his sidestand. With her right hand ready to pull out the revolver from her thigh at any moment, she slowly approached the man.

He was thin and wore clothing that was tattered all over. On his back was a nearly empty, flat backpack.

“Is he alive? Dead? Or neither?”

“What else is there other than dead or alive?”

“Hm, well we have to ask the person himself.”

At that moment, the man’s hand moved slightly.

“Alive it seems.”

Kino carefully raised the man’s body and slowly lay him face up.

He was considerably old, judging from his face. The wrinkled old man who looked to be over seventy years of age, drank a little from the water Kino offered him.

“Ah... thank you... Traveler, will you listen to my story...?” the man strained his voice and began to speak.

He said that he was a citizen of a country to the east.

Several decades ago, he set out alone on a journey in search of a formula for a medicine that can cure a disease that killed many people in his country. He was finally able to obtain it from a faraway land, and is now on his way home.

However, his body failed him at the last moment.

“I could no longer move... I’ll probably die here. I beg you—please take the formula to my country, which lies east of here.”

“...”

Kino gave Hermes one glance.

“If you’re gonna say—”

Spurred on by his light tone, Kino nodded.

“Unfortunately—” Kino began. “There’s no more need for that. We just came out of that country a few days ago. They were able to contain the disease, and almost everyone has been cured of it already.”

Upon hearing this, the man cried.

He cried as he muttered, ‘Oh, is that so? That’s great. That’s really great.’”

And while tears of joy flowed down his cheeks, his long life and journey came to an end.

—

They left the man’s body where they found him, and continued on their way. As they rode, Kino asked Hermes,

“What do you think? Is it really all right to leave it like that?”

“Hm, well we have to ask the person himself.”

“It’s already too late for that, Hermes.”

“That’s right, Kino.”

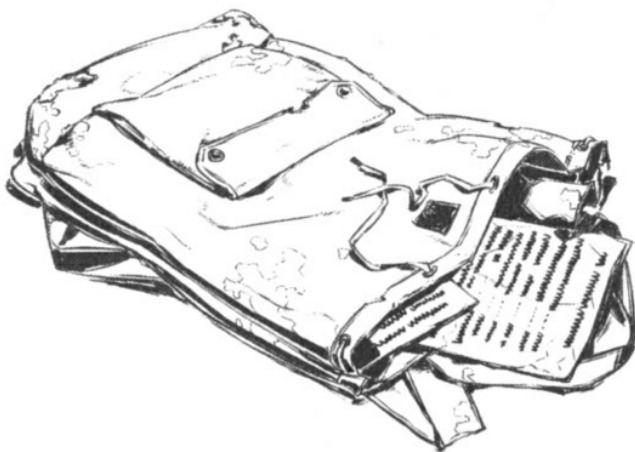
Then Kino looked up at the blue sky.

“It would be nice if the next country... has living people in it.”

Hermes answered from below.

“I wonder what kind of country the next one will be like?”

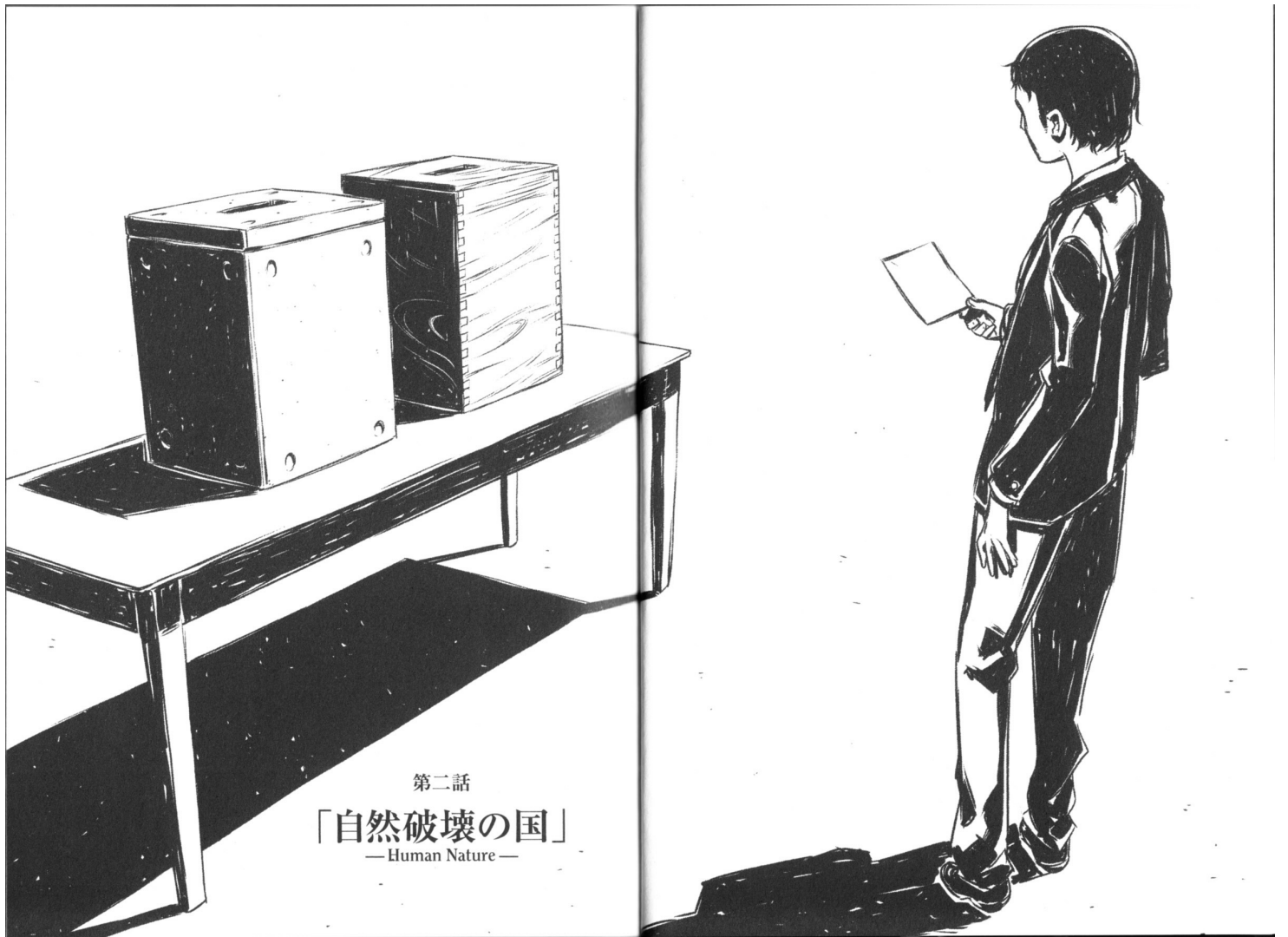
A motorrad ran through a lone road in the middle of a prairie.



Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up ↑](#)

First chapter published in regional Japanese newspapers starting April 2013.



第二話

「自然破壊の国」

— Human Nature —

Chapter 2: “Land of Environmental Destruction” — Human Nature —

(1/2)

“About the country we’re headed to? I explained it already, haven’t I... You were asleep again weren’t you, Hermes?”

“I can’t deny that possibility, Kino.”

Kino and Hermes were running through a road inside a jungle.

It was technically a winter morning, but the temperature and humidity were both high.

Kino wore a black vest over a white shirt as if it was summer. The vest was originally a jacket with sleeves that can be removed depending on the weather.

The road that ran through the jungle was so straight; it’s as if it was measured by a ruler. It was wide enough to let trucks pass each other, and comfortable to run in for one motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). As it was the dry season, the reddish-brown earth was completely parched and riddled with cracks not unlike the patterns on a turtle’s shell.

The cries of the birds from the trees on both sides could be heard. While some fled out of surprise from the boisterous roar of Hermes’ exhaust, others continued to cry just as loudly.

“Because they’re living just ahead of this jungle, they must be living in abundance of nature, eh? To put it nicely, they’re a people ‘at one with nature’, and to put it bluntly, ‘primitive’.”

Kino turned her head sideways in reply to Hermes.

“It’s the opposite, Hermes. According to people who had been there, this country quarried stones from a nearby mountain and used them to develop the entire country. And with sturdy houses and buildings, it was a completely different world from the outside.”

“Oh! That must be some sight! Kino, let’s hurry!”

“You really like buildings, don’t you, Hermes.”

“I love to see ‘great’ things made by humans! What about you, Kino?”

“It doesn’t matter if a scenery is natural or man-made. I love them all.”

“Oh? So which do you prefer? Sleeping in a tent in the midst of mother nature, or on a bed with white sheets inside an inn?”

Kino quickly answered Hermes’ question.

“The bed, of course.”

—

Around noon, Kino and Hermes arrived in the country.

When they thought they have escaped the jungle, gray walls soared before them. And Kino, as was customary, asked for permission to stay for three days at its gates.

They received permission and entered. What Kino and Hermes saw was the ‘different world’ they heard about.

It was a country so small, that the other side of the wall could be viewed from the entrance. And its interior was lined up with works of art made from stone.

The entire country was fashioned out of light grey stones of various shapes and sizes.

The finely cobbled road was as smooth as an ice surface. It stretched perfectly straight and wide, with footpaths on both sides.

The edges of the houses that stood on both sides were straight, like sharpened metal. From the narrow gaps, one could tell that the stones were stacked together with great accuracy.

At the center of the country stood a building that was even higher than the walls. The thirty-storey building stretched towards the sky like a gigantic tree.

“How marvelous! Kino, did you know that they took advantage of the variety of colors of stone for design? The whole country can be put in a museum! Kino,

take a picture!”

“You know very well that I don’t have a camera with me.”

“Then burn these images in your memory so that you can boast that you have seen such a great place in the next country!”

—

Kino and Hermes looked around the country.

As the entire road was paved, they moved around very quickly. But as much as the road is beautiful, there were no other engine-powered vehicles running on it. Only wooden carriages plied the road.

The people, who wore very simple clothing, looked at Kino with wonder but did not approach to talk. Eventually, they would cast down their gaze and walk away in quick strides. As there was nobody who tried to talk to her, Kino tried to initiate conversation, but everyone avoided her.

“What? Are they shy...?” Kino said, and Hermes answered in annoyance.

“They should be more dignified upon making such a beautiful country!”

“I would have loved to hear about this country and the stone structures.”

—

That evening, Kino and Hermes, who spent the entire day going around the country, arrived at the hotel recommended to them at the gates.

It was made of stones too. The rooms inside the sculpture-like building were just as magnificent.

The impressed Hermes was left in the room, while Kino headed for the cafeteria to eat dinner. Then, the person who came to serve her a delicious vegetable dish spoke.

“Traveler, it would’ve been great if you came days later...,” he said grimly. Kino asked why, but did not receive an answer.

“Hmm, I wonder why? Will there be some sort of interesting show in a few

days?”

So Hermes replied to Kino when she came back to the room.

—

They learned the answer the next morning.

Upon exiting the inn, Kino and Hermes were greeted by the sight of people out of their homes, gathered at the tall building at the center of the country. Their eyes were all fixed on it. Kino also turned her gaze to the building.

A few moments later, the foundation of the building exploded.

The stones that were blown up danced in the air, and the explosion echoed for a few seconds—,

“Eh?”

And the building began its slow collapse.

(2/2)

“Eh?”

Hermes cried out, while Kino stared mutely before her as the stone building lurched forward. As the stones scattered and crumbled down, the building soon lost its form.

Only a few seconds later, the building has completely collapsed.

And when the rumbling of the earth has finally settled down,

“Yes, very good.”

“Well done.”

The gathered citizens watched with no signs of surprise. On the contrary, they looked on with satisfaction.

“E-excuse me!”

Kino talked to the nearest person, a man who looked to be in his fifties.

“What is it, traveler?” The man did not avoid her, and answered Kino with a

rather refreshed expression.

“I can see that this building has collapsed, but why?”

“Yeah! It’s such a waste!”

“Yes, at last! With this, we have made our first step into becoming a wonderful country!” The man replied to Kino and Hermes.

“A wonderful country?”

“What do you mean?”

“Traveler, you have seen yourself how this country is like, haven’t you? Those roads and houses made of stone, and that building—”

Kino nodded, while Hermes said ‘yeah’.

The man tightened his fists and spoke out animatedly.

“Our country does not possess any beauty from nature!”

“Huh?” “What?” Kino and Hermes responded together.

“Nature! Nature’s rich greenery! Even though the outside of the walls is overflowing with the vitality of the jungle, within the walls it’s like this! Everything is manmade! This country transformed the wooden buildings and the dirt roads into stones simply because it would be more convenient if they lasted longer!”

“I see.”

“Ok, and then?”

Not willing to part with a person who was finally willing to talk with them, Kino and Hermes egged him on to continue his story.

“And it’s just as you see right now! We have made the entire country into stone! The ground could no longer be seen beyond the fields, and there’s no vegetation elsewhere. It transformed into an extremely artificial, unsightly place! What an ugly country! It would be shameful to let people from other countries see our country like this! Just the thought of being laughed at by foreigners disturbs me!”

“And so, everyone...”

“I see now.”

“During a country-wide referendum, an overwhelming number of people have chosen to destroy this artificial scenery! To start, we blew up that synthetic building.”

“You mean... from here on, you will destroy everything?” Kino asked.

“Of course! First, we will destroy all of the houses and throw away the stones! With that, the interior of the country should become enlivened. Then we will peel off the stone paving, and let the earth be revealed all over the country. If the earth is not visible, we can’t live the lifestyle meant for humans, you see. And then, the trees and grass will start to grow! We will return this place to nature! Even if it takes thirty years, we will finish it!”

Without them noticing it, a crowd has gathered around the man who was talking passionately of the future. They began applauding.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

“Let’s bestow our children with nature!”

“And the lifestyle that humans should have!”

So they shouted.

While all of this was happening, Hermes asked Kino, “Will you come here after thirty years?”

“Nope. I’m really glad that we were able to see this place yesterday,” Kino answered honestly.

Meanwhile, the man’s speech was still going on.

“Everyone, the day when we will be able to live in a world like that outside of the walls is not far! If we do our best, the disparity between the two sides of the walls will soon vanish!”

There was another applause. There were even some people who were so moved that their eyes began tearing up.

“Um, say—” Hermes began.

“Do you want to live in a place like the jungle outside?”

The man answered, “Indeed! That’s precisely how nature should be, you see! We would like to go back to a life among nature!”

“That would be very inconvenient, don’t you think?”

“What’s a little inconvenience if it’s for the sake of nature?”

—

The next day, Kino and Hermes left the country early in the morning, while the uproar from the destruction of houses and stripping of roads still resounded.

And as they ran in the dense jungle,

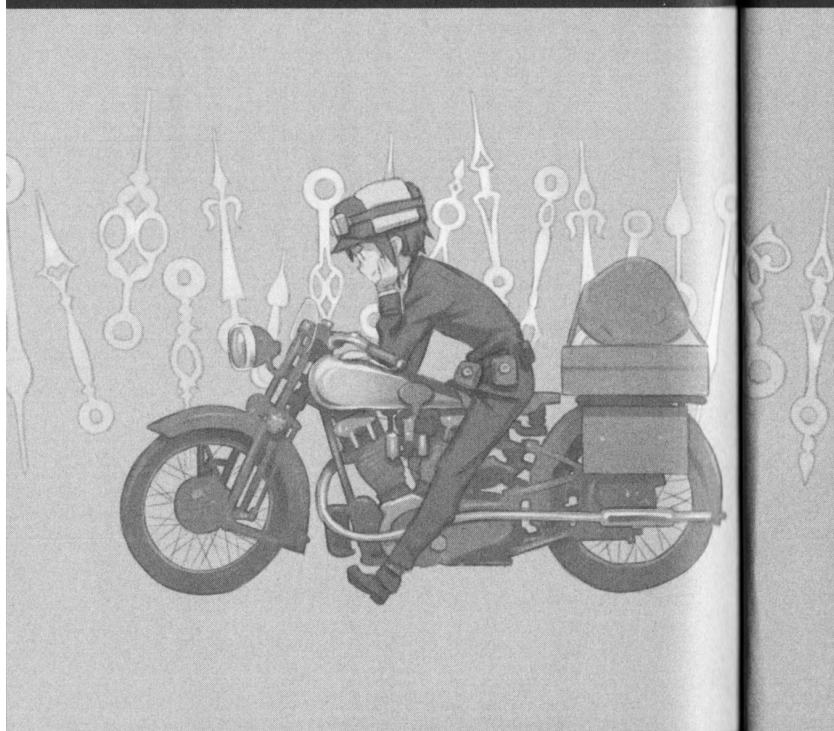
“Unbelievable! What a waste! If they wanted to live as one with nature, they didn’t have to destroy the country! They could’ve just built new walls around this jungle right here! That won’t even take thirty years!” Hermes furiously pointed out.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but even if we told them that, they’ll probably still proceed with destroying everything.”

“But why?”

Kino answered as she tapped Hermes’ fuel tank.

“Because humans prefer building something anew instead of something that has already been built.”



第三話
「時計の国」
— Memento Mori —

Chapter 3: “Land of Wristwatches” —

Memento Mori —

(1/4)

There was once a road inside a forest in the middle of summer.

The road, which was too narrow for a car to pass through, stretched amidst the luxurious growth of deciduous trees.

It twisted like a snake to avoid the numerous swamps that dotted the flat landscape.

The bare, brown terrain was dry but was left bumpy by the rains, while gigantic clusters of white clouds floated in the blue sky.

Kino and Hermes rode in a relaxed pace on this road.

Kino was in her usual summer getup—a black vest over a white shirt. The black vest was actually a jacket with its sleeves removed.

A wide belt was fastened at her waist, and a holster rested on her right thigh.

Hermes was as usual, packed with traveling luggage. There were boxes on both sides of his rear wheel, on top of which were a satchel and a sleeping bag.

Hermes spoke up to his rider. “Hey Kino.”

“What is it, Hermes?” Kino asked as she avoided a huge hollow in the road.

“In eighteen seconds, it will be exactly twelve o’clock. The two hands of the clock will precisely overlap each other.”

“Oh? Thanks, but that’s not particularly of importance to me right now.”

“Three, two, one, zero! There! Now it’s been four hours and forty-two minutes since we started running this morning. Also, you spent a total of one hour and nine minutes drinking tea and resting along the way.”

“It’s great that you can keep track of time so accurately, but I don’t really

need a watch. Besides, there's really no need to count starting from midnight. The day begins the moment I wake up at dawn just when the sky's becoming brighter, and ends once the sun sets. It's not bad to think of it that way."

"In short, you're using a 'sun clock'. The foundation from which all clocks were made. For some reason, you chose a very ancient method to keep time, Kino."

"Well, you can say that."

"But you also have another accurate clock with you."

"Oh? What else?"

"Your body clock. Even if the sun is away or hidden by rainclouds, you can always tell when you're hungry, right?"

"Oh, I see," Kino said, and stroked her belly admiringly.

"Hey Kino, what things have you heard about the next country?"

"It's a rather remote country. That's why, as you can see for yourself, the road leading to it is so narrow. And because of the lack of exchange with other people, there's not much information about it," Kino started the explanation. "According to rumors, they kept their traditional lifestyle, and seems to be a pretty laid-back country."

"In short, they shied away from developing technology to ease their lives, and are continuing their inconvenient lifestyles, right?"

"To put it bluntly, yes."

"What else?"

"They don't interact much with other countries, and take pride in their own culture."

"In short, they are an obstinate people who don't get along well with nearby countries."

"To put it bluntly, yes. There, I see it."

Kino and Hermes turned around a big curve, upon which the road turned perfectly straight once more. And just ahead, the grey walls interspersed

between the leaves and branches of the forest, appeared.

“What would it be like in there?” Hermes asked in delight.

“What would it be like indeed?” Kino answered the question with another question.

—

The walls were so high that one would hurt his neck if he looked up at its top. It surrounded the country in a perfect circle. One could tell how big a country is from the curvature of the walls. A moderate curve means a big country, and a steep curve means a small country.

“This one’s medium-medium-sized. Leaning to the smaller side of medium, I think.”

“That’s very confusing, Hermes.”

Kino stopped Hermes in front of the gates.

Naturally, the walls had gates for coming and going. And of course, these were shut to keep strangers out. There were also armed guards and an immigration officer.

In a country with advanced technology, guards would carry a persuader (Note: A gun), while immigration officers would use computers.

But here, the guards wore old-fashioned armor and carried long spears and big swords.

As usual, Kino requested for a three-day stay. The immigration officer, who used a pencil, said, “There are no tourist spots in this country. Also, there are also no dishes of particular interest to travelers. Is that all right with you?”

Kino answered that she doesn’t mind.

“Quite a strange one, aren’t you? Well, if you wish.” And with these words, the officer gave his permission.

—

Kino pushed Hermes through the entrance.

“Hey, did you see their arms, Kino?”

Kino nodded. “Yeah, I noticed. The guards and the officer all wore wristwatches.”

“Wasn’t this a laid-back country? Do they have jobs that require keeping track of every minute and every second?”

Kino answered the question to which she knew not the answer.

“I’m sure we’ll find out once we’re inside the country.”

(2/4)

Upon exiting the tunnel through the walls, Kino and Hermes laid eyes on the scenery inside the country.

As it was not too big of a country, they could dimly see the other side of the walls. Fields of wheat and vegetables spread throughout the flat terrain.

The houses that could be seen here and there were log houses made of lumber. And because it was almost evening, the thin smoke from cooking fire could be seen rising from the brick chimneys.

“Yep, it’s a laid-back country all right,” Hermes remarked.

Kino nodded. “Indeed. Now then—”

“Yes? What’s next?”

“Let’s go look for our lodgings.”

“I knew it.”

There were no hotels in this country, but there are facilities to accommodate guests. At least that’s what the immigration officer told them. And so, Kino sought this place.

Horse carriages leisurely went back and forth through the road between the fields. There was not a single vehicle that used an engine like Hermes.

The citizens coming back home from farm work wore modest clothing. They

looked on curiously at the traveler and the motorrad. At times, they would wave their hands at them.

Kino and Hermes looked at their arms.

And saw wristwatches strapped on their right or left wrists.

—

When they neared the country center, the fields diminished while the number of buildings increased.

Right before the center was the facility that they have been told about. There were lined up a couple of log houses, one of which was loaned to Kino and Hermes.

Kino pushed Hermes along and went in one of the houses.

It was by no means a big place, but it had walls, a roof, and a bed with white sheets.

“No complaints,” Kino said, visibly pleased, for this was plenty for someone who normally sleeps in a sleeping bag inside a tent.

“There’s no TV, but maybe you can request one with a room service?” Hermes joked despite knowing perfectly that there was no electricity in the country.

Kino conducted herself to the dining hall to eat dinner.

“I’m sure you’ve come a long way just to get here, traveler. But this is the only kind of food we have here,” a middle-aged lady said as she presented a dish of steamed chicken and vegetables sprinkled with salt.

When she returned to the log house, Kino informed Hermes of her impressions on the food.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve tasted something that delicious.”

“Good for you. By the way, do they have it too?” Hermes asked.

Kino answered with a nod. “Yes. Every single one of them wore wristwatches. Anyway, let’s ask about it tomorrow. For now I’ll sleep. Good night, Hermes.”

“Good night, Kino.”

—

The next morning, Kino woke up at dawn as usual.

Kino did her warm-up exercises amidst the morning mist. Then she performed her daily practice and maintenance on her persuaders before returning them to their holsters.

After having her breakfast of bread and vegetables, Kino proceeded on literally beating some sense into the still asleep Hermes. Once the sun arose, they went to tour the country.

Farm work has already begun, and many of the citizens are working up a sweat in the fields. An occasional glint can be seen from their wrists.

Kino and Hermes arrived at the center of the country. The wide main street was lined up left and right with buildings packed close together. The big windows and signboards advertised the fact that they were stores. There were also people making preparations for the opening of the shops.

Kino slowly rode Hermes through the road.

“What are you looking for, Kino?” Hermes asked Kino, who moved her head left and right.

“A watchmaker. Since everyone here wears watches, I thought stores selling watches should be very popular here.”

“Oh right.”

So Kino and Hermes went through the country’s sole shopping district.

“There’s none.”

“Not a single one.”

Having no other choice, Kino turned Hermes around and traced their way back to the main street.

“Let’s go to one store and ask someone.”

“Kino what about that fruit shop? It’s related to wristwatches.”

Though she had no idea what kind of link Hermes found between wristwatches and fruits, Kino abided and stopped Hermes by the store. The middle-aged man who managed the fruit shop looked curiously at them and came out.

“Good morning. I’m Kino and this here is my partner, Hermes. I arrived here yesterday.”

Kino removed her hat and greeted. Hermes also said hello.

The shopkeeper stared at Hermes up and down for a while.

“Oh, the strange things you see if you live long enough,” the man voiced out his thoughts. Then he glimpsed at his wristwatch. Kino looked intently at the man.

“Um, there’s something I would like to ask about this country. Will now be all right? I can come back if it’s still before opening hours,” Kino asked, and received an answer that she did not expect to hear.

“What do you mean by ‘opening hours’?”

(3/4)

“Huh? Um..., opening hours is... you know... the time when the shop is opened?” Kino answered the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper only became more confused with this, and leaned his head to one side.

“But don’t shops open... during the morning?”

“What?”

As both humans are now confused, Hermes barged in. “Um, we know it’s in the morning, but isn’t there an exact hour when you open the shop?”

“Hour...? Doesn’t that refer to the flow of time? I’m not mistaken or anything, right?”

“Yes,” Kino nodded.

“What time is it right now?” Hermes asked.

“Let me see... right now it’s...”

The man looked at the watch on his left wrist once more. And then,

“Forty-eight years, one month, four days, three hours and forty-three minutes.”

“...”

“...”

“Is that not what you wanted to know, traveler?”

Receiving a completely different answer, Kino changed the question.

“Um, what is that thing you’re wearing on your left wrist? I see everyone’s wearing something like it.”

This time the man responded confidently to Kino’s words. Delight replaced the confusion in his face, and he angled the dial of the watch for Kino and Hermes to see.

“That’s right. It’s called a wristwatch. Neat thing, eh? This one’s mine.”

It had a black leather strap and a circular metallic case. The dial had one long and one short hand, and six tiny windows from which numbers could be seen.

And the hands are pointed to indicate forty-four past three. It might indicate fifteen forty-four, but either way, it was not a time that indicated morning.

“We were just curious because we saw that everybody in this country wears one. Is there a store that sells these?”

The man was surprised at Kino’s question. He drew back his hand and shook his head.

“Heavens no! It’s a pity, but a traveler can’t have one. It’s because you’re not from this country.”

“Oh that’s too bad. So it’s not for sale? It’s some sort of identification for the citizens?”

“That’s right. Besides, even if you immigrate here, you still can’t have one.”

“Oh, why is that?” Hermes asked.

“Because you don’t know exactly when you’re born right?”

“When I’m born...?”

“Yes. Only your parents or your doctor can keep track of that.”

Just when the conversation is beginning to get muddled up again, a woman who seemed to be the shopkeeper’s wife appeared.

“Oh my, you’re the traveler who came yesterday, I suppose? When did a foreigner last come here, I wonder?”

The woman said. Kino observed once more the fact that the woman wore a wristwatch, and asked.

“If it’s not so rude of me, will you tell me what ‘time’ it is?”

The woman readily consented.

“My watch says, forty-four years, eight months, nine days, fifteen hours, and three minutes.”

“I see now...”

“I get it!”

Kino and Hermes now understood how their watches work.

“Those watches indicate how long it’s been since a person was born. In short, a person’s age.”

For a moment, the couple gave Kino a blank stare, then said.

“Why traveler, you didn’t know what a wristwatch is for?”

“I guess it can’t be helped because you’re not from this country.”

The shopkeeper then explained to the clueless Kino and Hermes.

“You see, these wristwatches are made by the best engineers in our country, and are only given to parents when they have a child. Upon a certain age, the parents will hand it over to their children, who will have to wear it for life. As long as it is worn, the mainspring inside it will be wound by the movement of the wearer’s arm.”

“And it will indicate how many years, months, days and hours a person has

lived.”

“Exactly. Our wristwatches are our lifetime.”

Now that one riddle has been solved, Hermes asked about another.

“If the time on everyone’s watches are different, then how about the common time in this country? Like the exact hour and minute when you have to meet someone, or the time in the morning when you should wake up? Do you have a special watch for those?”

The shopkeeper tilted his head once more.

“Common time? I don’t quite understand. Don’t everyone wake up in the morning? Work during the day? And once it is evening, don’t we all go home and sleep once the sun sets?”

“You mean... the people here do not share a ‘common time’?” Kino asked to confirm.

“There’s no such thing. Besides, if something like that exists—”

The shopkeeper peered into Kino’s eyes.

“Won’t every single day be troublesome? For example, having to do something on the exact hour or minute? Won’t you have to look at your watch and think ‘I’ve got to hurry,’ or ‘I won’t make it’? Won’t doing that everyday be a huge burden? Won’t your mind eventually break down from that?”

(4/4)

After learning about wristwatches,

“If you like, you can have something to eat,”

They were treated to some of the grapes sold in the store.

“It’s not fair, Kino.” As he couldn’t eat, Hermes complained while Kino continued to feast on the delicious grapes.

When they were about to leave the shop, the shopkeeper told Kino and Hermes this,

“If this is your first time to know about wristwatches, I have a good idea. A bit

ways off the north lies the cemetery where everyone in this country rests. It would be nice if you can drop by. With that metallic vehicle, I'm sure you'll reach it quickly. There are plenty of wristwatches there too."

"I don't really understand, but we'll go see it."

"I don't really understand, but let's go see it."

Kino and Hermes headed north.

They idly traversed the perfectly straight road between the green fields while enjoying the scenery around them.

Eventually, the northern walls came into view, and they found their destination.

It was the cemetery that looked like a huge park.

Kino and Hermes looked at it from the entrance.

On the beautifully maintained bright green lawn spread before them were the gray tombstones, lined up in neat rows.

"It's a pretty cemetery, but where are the wristwatches?"

"I guess we have to look inside, Kino."

There was a tiny building labeled with the words 'Management Office' at the entrance.

When they approached it, they saw an old woman seated by the ticket window.

"Excuse me. I'm a traveler. Is it all right for me to go inside?" Kino asked.

"Of course. You can have a long look at their times," the old woman said with a smile, and stroked the time-worn wristwatch on her right arm.

—

Kino slowly rode Hermes inside the empty cemetery.

Then they entered the path before the lined up tombstones.

Kino cut off Hermes' engine and pushed him along.

After walking for a while, they could look at the tombstones from a closer distance.

“I see.”

“I get it!”

Kino and Hermes understood the words of the shopkeeper and the old woman.

The tombstones had various shapes.

There were squares and circles, and shapes that looked like food. There were even those formed after the likeness of the person that rested beneath it. They were designed in whatever form they desired.

However, all of the tombstones had one thing in common.

All of the tombstones had a small hole at the center.

Inside that hole is a cylindrical piece of stone.

And on this stone, there was a single wristwatch strapped.

The times on the wristwatches have stopped.

The hands are still, and the number of years, months, and days no longer increased.

No two dials shared the exact same numbers and position of hands. The threadbare wristwatches have finished one task and are serving another.

“When the citizens come here, they would look at the wristwatches on the graves and would be reminded how much time their loved ones spent on this world. And at the same time...”

Hermes continued Kino’s words.

“They would appreciate the fact that the ones they’re wearing on their wrists will definitely stop moving someday.”

“‘Remember that you will die,’ huh?” Kino whispered vacantly.

“So how about it? Shall we keep track of a ‘Kino-time’ from now on? From the moment when you became Kino up until now?” Hermes interrupted Kino’s

thoughts.

Kino smiled. "I'll have to decline that offer, Hermes."

"It will be fine! I can keep count even when I'm asleep!"

"That's not it. I'm fine with my time. You don't need a watch when traveling. More importantly, you should keep an Hermes-time instead."

"Eh, why?"

"So you can wake up on time without me having to beat you up."

"Ah, that's impossible."

"Why?"

"I don't think I could keep track of time properly while I'm asleep."

"That's not what you said a while ago!"

"Past is past. Present is present. 'No two moments are exactly the same,' right? Do you get it, Kino?"

"No, not at all."

"Same here."

"But I do know that the time we spend talking like this together is great."

"Same here."

—

The next day, Kino and Hermes left the country.

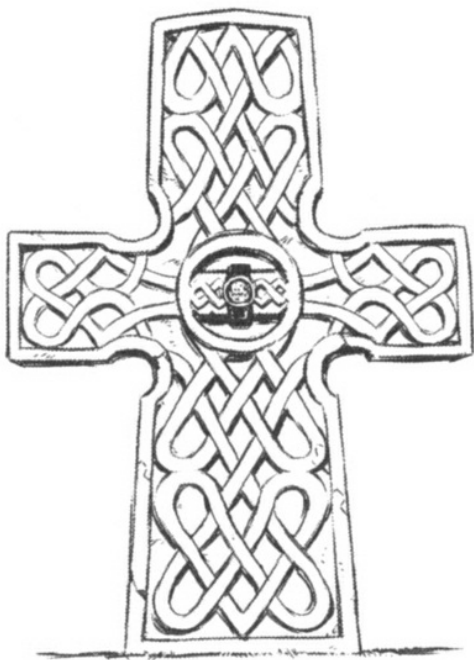
While looking at the traveler and the motorrad riding away, one of the guards talked to the other.

"We get to see this scenery every day, so I didn't expect one tiny thing to make such a huge difference."

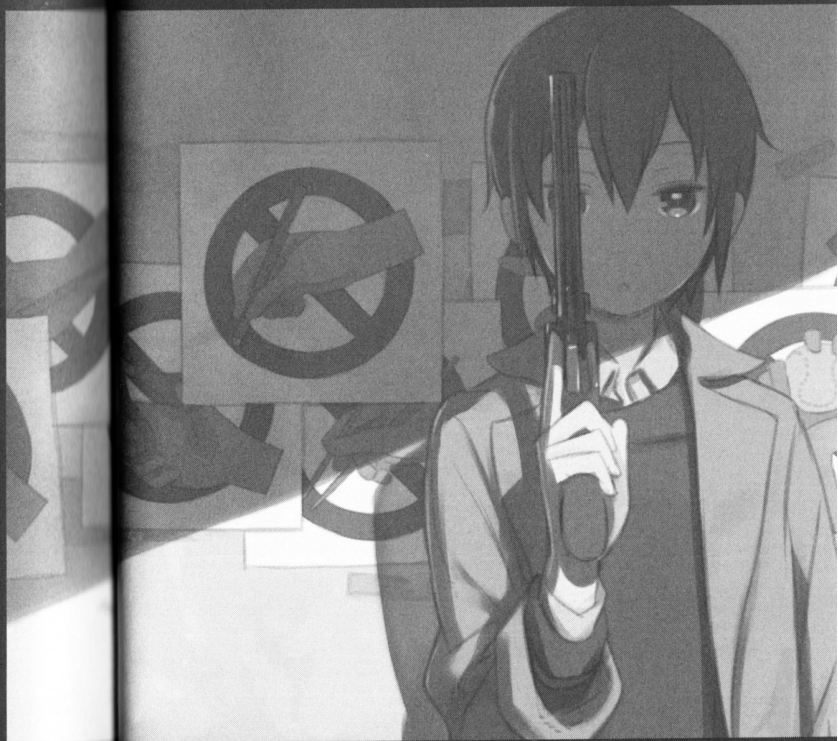
"You bet. It's the strangest thing I've ever seen one."

And then the two looked at their wristwatches at the same time.

And gazed at different times.



第四話
「左利きの国」
— Do the RIGHT Thing! —



Chapter 4: “Land of Left-Handedness” — Do the RIGHT Thing! —

(1/2)

A shot and a clang of metal resounded inside a forest, sending birds fleeing all at once from their nests.

Within this dark forest of coniferous trees stood Kino, garbed in her usual black jacket, with a hand persuader (Note: a gun, in this case a pistol) in her right hand. Thin, white smoke drifted from the tip of its barrel.

It was the persuader Kino called by the name ‘Canon’, a revolver with a lotus root-shaped cylinder that can accomodate eight .44 caliber rounds in one loading.

Roughly forty meters from Kino, an iron plate was dangling by a sturdy string from the branch of a tree.

The round iron plate was thirty centimeters in diameter, its surface full of bumps.

Because of the round fired but a moment earlier, it swayed intensely; back and forth like a playground swing.

“Bull’s eye.”

Hermes delightedly announced from beside Kino.

Kino switched Canon over to her left hand, and firmly raised the hammer with her thumb.

She protruded her left hand forward while slightly inclining it inwards, and established her aim towards the iron plate, which appeared like a tiny dot from the distance. She grasped the outstretched fist with her right hand, and pressed her arm against her chest.

She fired.

The lead bullet flied out along with the roar, and hit dead center of the iron

plate that was only beginning to settle down from its swaying. A shrill echo accompanied the crumpling of its metal surface.

“Excellent. It doesn’t really matter which hand you use eh, Kino? Impressive as ever, you sharpshooter!”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Hermes.”

“I don’t really mind. Let’s just leave, please?”

“So that’s what you want after all. Well, fine.”

Kino replaced Canon’s magazine and returned it to the holster on her right thigh. She retrieved the iron plate target and stowed it in her bag.

She put on a hat with flaps that covered her ears, and fixed her faded silver-framed goggles over her eyes.

“Okay.”

Kino started Hermes’ engine.

—

After running through the narrow road within the forest, Kino and Hermes arrived at a country.

“So countries also exist in places like this, huh?” Hermes remarked, his tone vaguely hinting either irony or admiration, but possibly both.

“I heard from a neighboring country that no one has come to this place for some time because it’s too far.”

Kino’s answer was followed by Hermes’ amused comment.

“And it is just like you to come to such a place, Kino.”

“It’s fun visiting unknown countries.”

Evening has just begun.

The forest was cleared around the walls that surrounded the country. The orange sun dimly floated on the western sky, where the clouds have thinned out.

In front of the tightly-shut gates were two guards carrying long rifles on their backs.

One of them was in his forties, while the other was a far younger man in his twenties.

They displayed astonishment upon seeing Kino and Hermes.

"I am Kino, and this is my partner Hermes. I would like to request permission to stay for three days to rest and look around your country." Kino stated her usual request.

"My, it has really been a long time since we had a visitor. Well now, I have one question for you." The older of the two guards posed a question to Kino.

"Go ahead."

"Traveler, which is your dominant hand?"

"Dominant hand?" Kino asked just to make sure.

Considering the possibility that Kino did not know what he means, the guard expounded, "Which hand do you use to write? Which hand can make you throw a ball farther? Or which hand do you use to shoot a persuader."

Hearing the last question, Hermes answered, "Kino can shoot well with either hand."

"Okay, but which one's easier for you to use?"

Kino honestly answered the guard's question.

"I'm right-handed. I can only write with my right hand."

And at that moment,

"T-this bastard!"

The young guard suddenly became enraged, and seized the rifle on his back with both hands. He raised it overhead and aimed to strike at Kino's head.

Kino dodged.

As the guard struck from left to right, Kino quickly dodged to the left side of the attacker, and scooped the guard's feet with her left leg.

“Wah!”

And with only this, the young guard toppled over.

The older guard remained on his spot, but a bitter expression took over his face. Kino vigilantly took a quick step backward, and enquired, “I am yet to enter this country and have done nothing wrong. I don’t see why I should be treated with such violence.”

“Indeed, it’s just as you say. Please forgive his imprudence.” The guard calmly replied, but he was looking at Kino with cold, sharp eyes. “However, we cannot allow you to enter the country.”

“Eh, why?”

It was not Kino, but Hermes who sought an explanation from the guard.

“Because you are right-handed.”

(2/2)

“What?”

Hearing Kino’s reply, the older guard explained,

“You said it yourself didn’t you? That you’re right-handed. You can’t take it back anymore,” he said with a stern face.

The younger guard who toppled over upon a failed attempt to strike Kino slowly got up with a mortified expression.

“Damn right-hander! Just go to hell!”

He glared and spat these words with undisguised hostility.

“Then I shall give up on entering your country,” Kino said and quickly asked to confirm, “So you mean right-handed people aren’t allowed to enter this country? And there’s not a single one inside?”

“Of course. At least not outside the jail,” the older guard answered. “In our country, it is illegal to be right-handed. A person who cannot fix this disability shall stay in prison until his death.”

“I see.... Since when?” Kino asked but,

“Shut up! Just get the hell out of here!” The young guard shouted until he was pacified by his senior,

“Hold on. We can make this traveler spread the word about our wonderful country. Even a right-hander should be able to do that much.”

“You’re right.... That’s a great idea!” The young guard expressed his admiration, and turned to Kino with a pompous smirk.

“Hey you! Since the captain’s going out of his way to explain, you better listen!”

“Sure, please go on,” Kino replied impassively.

“Tell us! Tell us!” While Hermes answered with utmost delight.

The older guard worded his explanation as if he was dealing with a dimwitted student.

“You see, most of the people in our country are left-handed. That’s common sense. But sometimes, right-handed people are born. I am referring to those who can only write or throw things with their right hands. They are pardoned until the age of three because, well, it just can’t be helped. But everybody agrees that it should be fixed if possible.”

“I see.”

“And then? And then?”

“However, a terrible incident occurred all over the country. A right-hander carried out a series of extremely brutal murders. The man fled after stabbing five people to death. The criminal appealed to the court about discrimination to right-handers. He claimed that he had done nothing wrong, and what he did was a just retribution to a society that does not recognize right-handers!”

“After that?”

“What happened?”

“Until then, our citizens have been very tolerant to this ‘minority’ group. But after this incident, we could no longer allow it. Right-handers are dangerous elements who engulf society in fear and chaos. They are intolerable terrorists. To prevent this kind of incident from happening again, right-handedness was

completely outlawed. In short, if a person cannot correct his right-handedness, he will be thrown into the prison without mercy.”

“O...kay...”

“Really!?”

“Obviously, right-handed travelers cannot be permitted to enter the country. Do you understand?” The senior guard stressed out.

“Be grateful that we let you live!” The younger guard hissed, his uniform still visibly dirty from his fall.

“I understand the circumstances now so I will excuse myself, but before that —” Kino began calmly, “I would like to confirm a few things. First, is it really all right for me to spread this to other countries?”

“Of course. As much as you are capable of, that is,” The older guard answered with a hint of sarcasm.

“And, I can tell them that this country throws right-handed people to jail?”

“Yes. I’d be surprised if there’s a country that doesn’t imprison criminals and terrorists. Might as well be called a ‘terrorist country’.”

Kino went astride Hermes and started his engine.

Then she spoke in a voice loud enough not to be subdued by the boisterous roar of Hermes’ exhaust.

“Then I shall take my leave now. —One last thing.”

“What now?” The guard grumbled and jerked his chin, his face betraying his distaste.

“Of all the countries I have seen up to now...” Kino began, “Right-handed people vastly outnumber left-handed ones. I’ve heard before that approximately eighty to ninety percent of humans are right-handed. If I told them about your country, what do you think would they do?”

And without waiting for an answer, Kino dashed away.

Leaving the two guards with transformed expressions.

—

Inside the gloomy forest.

“Hey Kino. If other countries find out about that country, do you think they would attack it?”

“I believe there’s even less people who think that way than there are left-handed ones.”

“I guess you’re right.”



第五話

「割れた国」

— Trigger Happy —

Chapter 5: “A Land Torn Apart” — Trigger Happy —

(1/2)

“Hey there traveler and motorrad! If you have business in this country, I regret to say this, but you have to give up on it.”

Kino and Hermes were told such by a man in front of the country’s gates.

Seemingly in his forties, the bespectacled man had an air of a scholar. Beside him was a large truck with several bodyguards carrying rifles.

Indeed, the gates that should have been closed were reduced to a pile of charcoal.

The state the country was in could be seen beyond a huge hole in the tall, grey walls.

Houses burned to the ground, desolate fields, and collapsed buildings.

“It’s in ruins all right. Not a single soul in there,” Hermes said. After giving a simple self-introduction to bespectacled man, Kino said, “I heard that this was a ‘small but beautiful country, not so advanced in technology, in which people lived carefree lives’.”

“That’s correct. Half a year ago, that is.”

“What happened here?”

“Was it destroyed by another country?”

The man only shook his head to Kino and Hermes’ questions.

“Nope. It’s a civil war. This country’s people killed each other, within the narrow confines of these walls.”

“Why? Are there differences in race or ideology severe enough to warrant killing each other?”

“Not really. The conflict was between ‘westerners’ and ‘easterners’. They are

of one race, and there were no differences in beliefs, either. The only difference is on which side of the main road they live in.”

“Okay, but why? Since you seem to be well-informed about it, will you tell us?”

“Well, it’s the result of my research, but if you promise you won’t announce it in my country before me, I don’t really mind.”

After Kino and Hermes made their promise, the man took out a big binder from the bag at his feet.

He opened it, and showed the contents to Kino and Hermes.

Inside the binder were a number of papers contained within transparent films. The pieces of paper were dirty and slightly burnt. None of them are in good condition.

The man in glasses began, “These are journals and letters written by various people from this country. It took me days to gather these precious data from the ruins. At last I’ve finished my research, and just when I was about to return to my own country, you came. That’s some luck you have.”

“Kino’s luck is top class, you know. Anyway, what’s written in those? What did you find out?” Hermes asked.

“Will we understand if we read those? Will you let us read them?” Kino added.

The man smiled. “Sure. Please read them. But in the order I arranged them in. If you do, you’ll find out why this country perished.”

—

Kino took the binder.

To avoid dropping it, Kino placed it on top of the bag on Hermes’ carrier.

She then opened it and read aloud the first paper in the order the man placed them in.

‘It’s the end for this country. It’s likely that the one who will be reading this is

not from this country. The attack of the easterners has begun. It's to annihilate us westerners. We will be fighting as well. But all that will be left here will be corpses. It doesn't matter which side wins; all's over for this country. I'll kill as many easterners as I can, to avenge the lives of our beloved children. Goodbye, everyone.'

When Kino finished reading,

"That's the first page? The *end* of the civil war?" Hermes asked in wonder.

"This is in reversed chronological order, isn't it."

Kino turned to the bespectacled man, uttering a statement instead of a question. The man smiled, and urged her to go on.

Kino read the next page.

'Today, the professional killers from the west side have gotten near our district. The men were soon discovered and seized. After a severe beating, they were killed. Even though they have killed so many, the westerners don't have any plans to stop. But we can't afford to withdraw. We have sacrificed so much. We will continue fighting until we achieve victory! We will be the ones to smile at the end!'

Kino read the next page.

'It's a war! A war! I'll kill them! I'll kill them all! The grown-ups told us kids that we can join now too! I'll kill them! Those easterners! I'll take on the guys that killed papa and brother! I'll kill them all!'

Kino read the next page.

'The police can no longer contain the fightings... or maybe they're joining in themselves? The civilians are continuing to fight against each other. I live just beside the main street. I don't want to fight with the easterners with whom I often chatted with. I can't wield a sword against people I know. I'm sure they feel the same way. They won't hear of fighting against their friends. It would be great if everyone calmed down. No, I'm sure it will be fine! Only fools would think it's not stupid to kill each other in a small country like this. I truly believe that.'

When Kino read up to this point, “‘Believe’, huh? It’s pretty sad to read that when you already know the aftermath,” Hermes said, though it’s uncertain if he truly felt that way.

“You bet,” the man in glasses replied, but again it’s uncertain if he truly felt that way.

Kino read the next page.

‘Today, the skirmish finally turned into a full-blown war.... Dozens of easterners and westerners came to the central park with weapons in hand, killing each other. Unbelievable. Are our people really this stupid...? The police suppressed them, but several people died, and much more were injured. What foolishness... Of course, the easterners can’t be forgiven, but that’s no reason to kill each other.’

Kino read the next page.

‘I don’t believe it! Two idiots crossed swords and called it a ‘duel between east and west’! They even brought out ancient swords, armors and shields! What fools! If they want to die, they should die by themselves! But I won’t deny that those westerners are getting on my nerves!’

Kino read the next page.

‘Those easterners are getting cocky recently. What’s up with them? Were they like that before? I’ve talked with my family, and we all share the same opinion. But it’s annoying. I’m not saying westerners are superior or anything, but what happened to basic courtesy? Was it difference in education? Or in culture? Anyway, I’m really pissed off.’

Kino read the next page.

‘Today, I’ve spoken with westerners, and I thought every single one of them was weird. Maybe they have something against us who live in the eastern side? Was it because we have suddenly grown in number? I’m sure if we sat down and shared a meal, they’ll realize that we’re all brothers living in the same country. It’s not a good idea to fight.’

Kino read the next page.

‘Lately, easterners and westerners are calling each other fools. I don’t know how it started, but this doesn’t look good. Calling someone else a fool is definite proof of lack of confidence in yourself. I can imagine everyone blushing when they realize that. Humans learn from their mistakes, after all.’

Kino read the next page.

‘There was tension between an easterner mom and a westerner mom in today’s gathering. It was about a fight between their children. Children are prone to petty squabbles, in which parents should not interfere with. For adults to take them seriously... how childish.’

Kino read the next page.

‘Today, we quarrelled over what we like more: ‘onion field’ or ‘potato garden’. The easterner kids liked onion, while we westerners like potato. Everyone got angry when they told us that potato garden is weird. I know it’s not right, but I can’t help getting angry.’

Kino couldn’t read what’s next, because it was the last page.

“What’s ‘onion field’ and ‘potato garden’?” Kino raised her face and asked.

“Those are the most popular pastries in this country. They were introduced to this country ten years ago by another country. ‘Onion field’ is an onion-shaped chocolate-covered cracker, while ‘potato garden’ is a potato-shaped chocolate-covered biscuit.”

“Okay, aside from the shape, what else is different?”

The man tilted his head to Hermes’ question.

“There’s no other difference. Unfortunately, all stocks were burnt away during the war, so I can’t show you a sample.”

Kino returned the binder.

“Thank you very much. —Then, you mean to say that the cause of the civil war is an argument on which is better between two sweets?”

“I’m not one hundred percent positive. But, I believe this is conclusive enough

to report back to my country,” the man answered as he received the binder. Then, “I’ll have to go now. It takes one month to get home. It’s really troublesome. What about you guys?”

“...”

Kino seemed to be quietly thinking of something, then answered, “For now, I would like to check the country.”

“Well, touring ruins must be part of the fun of traveling huh? There are no duds in there, but be careful of the collapsing buildings. The remains had been collected after the investigation.”

“Thanks. By the way, there’s one last thing.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Why did you investigate?”

The man shrugged.

“Won’t it suffice to say that I was simply led by my curiosity?”

“It’s hard to imagine you’d go this far just for that. And I thought it was strange you know so well about the pastries even though, according to you, no stocks were left after the war.”

“You’re a sharp one.”

“It was your country who introduced the pastries here, right?”

“Well, you’ve got me beat! Okay, I surrender! You’re right!” The man answered in amusement. “Yes! Both sweets are being sold in our country. It is made by the same company. I was asked by that company to do a research, and to come back with the results.”

“Then what will you do with it?” Hermes asked.

“Why obviously, to come up with a marketing ploy! And I have!”

‘These pastries are worth fighting and dying for!’



第六話

「貧乏旅行の国」

— Trouble Writer —

Chapter 6: “Land of Penniless Travel” — Trouble Writer —

(1/1)

[Hello?]

[Ah, it connected! —I’m sorry for calling you out of the blue like this! You’re Kino right? The traveller who arrived today?]

[That’s right...]

[Please help me!]

[Huh? —Um, will you please tell me first who you are? In the first place, I don’t know anyone from this country...]

[Ah, I’m sorry for taking long to explain... I’m a writer from this country! I was once a traveller like you, but I still go out of the country from time to time.]

[What can I do for you?]

[I heard from the guards that you’ve been travelling for a long time! Is that true?]

[Well, I guess it’s been quite some time. Though I can’t say exactly how long it has been.]

[Great! Then please tell me a story about your travels!]

[My travels? What for?]

[Um, I’ll explain! When I was young, I travelled like you, and went to all kinds of places. It was tough and troublesome, travelling on a tight budget. But it was fun, so I would occasionally return, then find a job until I earned a small amount so that I could set out again...]

[Uh-huh...]

[And one time, while I stayed in the country, I wrote an article about one episode of my travels and tried sending it to a publisher.]

[And it sold.]

[Exactly! It became a book entitled 'Diary of a Poor Traveller', and became my source of income!]

[Isn't that a good thing?]

[It is! It sure is, but you see... because of it, I am no longer able to do penniless travelling!]

[Huh?]

[Because the book was selling well, I get a cut from the earnings even when I'm not doing anything! So when I go out to travel, I can afford pricey equipment and comfy vehicles!]

[Isn't that great?]

[It's great! —But... What my readers want are anecdotes of a poor traveller! They don't want to read about the travels of a celebrity!]

[I get it...]

[Right now, 'Diary of a Poor Traveller' is being serialized in a newspaper! I'm glad that it has gained so much fame, but I don't have any more ideas! I have run out of stories about my poor travels! Recently, I no longer walk with cheap shoes but travel on an air-conditioned, fully-furnished camping car... Plus my persuader (Note: a gun) is no longer the type where you'll have to make a gamble on whether the bullet will come out or not! Now I buy the top quality kind...]

[Okay...]

[I have to finish it by the day after tomorrow! The deadline of for the column is drawing near! Help me!]

[Um, I understand your situation, but have you considered the fact that this has nothing to do with me?]

[Please help me! Just one story about your poor travels! Please! Tell me one!]

[But that would be lying won't it?]

[It's a lie all right! But please, if you have any that would be interesting, that

will do! I'm sure there is! I don't have any more time! The deadline's almost up!
It will be fine!]

[No, I doubt it will be fine... And even if you make it this week, what are you planning to do about next week?]

[I'll have you tell me another story!]

[I'll leave the day after tomorrow...]

[Then I'll give you money! I'll give you half of my cut! So please stay some more! And please tell me a story! Help me! The deadline!]

[I can see why you're so desperate, but I can't do it.]

[No waaaayyyy...! Ahhhhhh! What am I going to doooooooooo!]

[Um... can't you just ignore the deadline?]

[If I do that, the editorial department and the readers will despise me! I will no longer be needed in this country!]

[Then why don't you just leave the country?]

[Eh?]

[Take all the money you have and go on a journey again. Once you've used up all your money and become poor again, you can just come back and write your 'Diary of a Poor Traveller', right? You can also write something like 'Traveling to Escape from Deadlines' or something.]

[That!]

[That?]

[That's it!!!]

—

"Welcome back, Kino. Who's the person who went all the trouble to contact you in a hotel?"

"Some person worried about 'travelling'. Wanted some advice."

"Uh-huh. Were you able to help that person?"

“I don’t know yet... Maybe.”

“Ain’t that great?

“Oh, well. But because of that, it looks like I just increased the number of people who will get troubled...”

“What are you saying? Travelling is always accompanied by trouble, you know.”

“And what’s important is how you go about it, right? Hermes.”

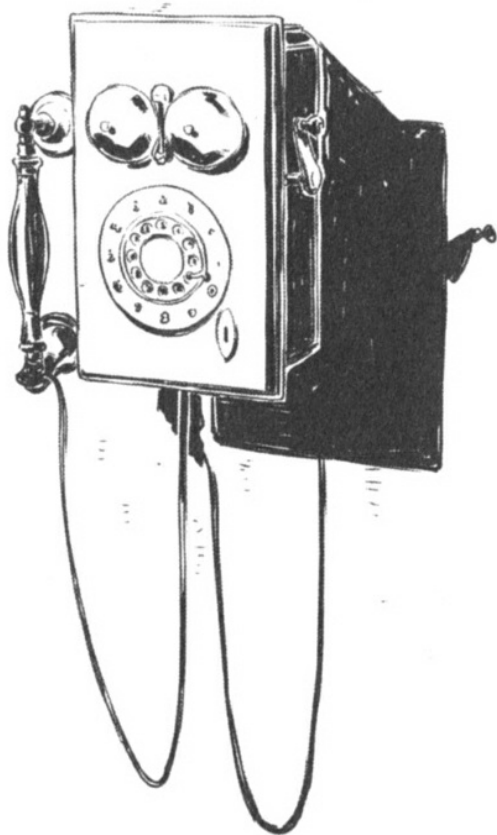
“Well, they say ‘travel’ and ‘trouble’ are derived from the same word.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a lie though.”

“A lie, huh.”

“A lie indeed. But there are plenty of people who believe everything!”



第七話

「樂園の話」

— Exile —



Chapter 7: “A Tale of Paradise” — Exile —

“It’s an old, old story.”

An old woman whispered to a girl tucked in bed with a soft blanket.

“Uh-huh. An old, old story.” The girl, whose long hair and head was buried in a soft pillow, said to the old woman who was seated beside her.

“Yes, very, very old. And it’s a story that no one knows about.”

To this, the little girl tilted her head and asked, “No one knows? Then who told you about it, grandma?”

The old woman called Shishou answered, “Before that, let me tell you the story.”

“Um, okay,” the girl answered, her eyes slightly becoming clouded with drowsiness.

“Then let’s begin.”

And the old woman began her tale.

“A long, long time ago, there was a paradise...”

——

And one day a woman came upon this paradise.

She had long, black hair; a woman at the prime of her youth.

—

She discovered the entrance to this paradise; a place called the ‘first pond’—

—

The woman floated on the pond face up, gazing at the long and narrow strip of

the blue sky beyond the precipitous cliffs.

“Hey! Are you alive?!”

People came, along with the lively splash of water.

They were all women.

Two looked to be in their twenties, three in their thirties, and there was one in her forties—the woman who just called out in a commanding voice.

All of them wore shirts and shorts with tattered sleeves and hems, serving no other purpose but to cover what has to be covered. And none of them seemed to mind.

They were barefoot, and their legs were submerged shin-deep into the pond’s water.

The air that streamed into the valley was warm, so their light clothing doesn’t seem to bother them.

“ ... ”

The black-haired woman mutely raised herself.

She on the other hand, wore long pants, a white shirt with an elegant black jacket on top, and boots on her feet. Of course, she was completely soaked from head to toe.

As the pond was rather shallow, her feet got stuck as she stood up.

The black-haired woman who was drenched well up to her belly slowly walked towards the coast where the women were.

The pond’s water was very still, and as she walked, she felt fish swimming away.

“Oh! You don’t seem to be hurt anywhere! —I’m glad we don’t have to prepare a funeral!” The woman in her forties cried out in delight.

As she plodded within the pond, the black-haired woman looked at her surroundings.

First she observed the shallow pond filled with clear water. It was a long and narrow ellipse about thirty meters wide and seventy meters long.

All around it was a bank of mixed white sand and pebbles. Left and right where the precipitous cliffs that rose perpendicularly with the bottom, several hundred meters in height.

Finally, the black-haired woman turned her gaze towards the other women, and asked, “Where am I?”

Her question was soon answered.

“This place? We call it ‘paradise’. You’ll know soon enough. Now, since you seem fine, we’ll guide you through this place right away. —But before that, do you remember your name?”

“I normally don’t use a name.”

“Then, what were you called?”

“The last person I was with called me ‘Shishou’.”

“‘Shishou’, is it? That will do. Just a heads up, you don’t need your old name here. I myself have forgotten what I was called in the past. You can just call me ‘Kashira’. Got it, Shishou?”^[1]

—

With her hair and clothes still wet, the woman called Shishou was guided by Kashira and the other women.

They were inside a valley that continued endlessly.

Interposed left and right by dreadfully high cliffs, it was a place barred from the outside world.

The area that contained the pond was still wide, around fifty meters across. But as they walked along the causeway downstream, the valley narrowed steadily.

There, because of several large rocks, the flow of the river was brought to a halt. They carefully climbed over the gigantic rocks that served as a dam, and saw beyond it the river that has turned into a gushing mountain stream.

As the valley became narrower, the stream also became faster.

In an area barely twenty meters across, the river made rumbling noises and flowed with extreme vigor through the fissures between rocks larger than humans.

Below the hollowed cliffs, the women walked the narrow path in a single file.

"It's also like this upstream that pond. You must have lost consciousness and was carried by the current non-stop for several kilometers, tens of kilometers even," the woman called Kashira explained to Shishou, who was walking just behind her. Then she asked, "Do you remember anything?"

Shishou answered, "I can only clearly remember up until my car was swept into the river."

"Oh? How did that happen? Mind telling us?"

"I made an imprudent decision in the previous country. It happened while I was escaping from my pursuers."

"I see. So you pushed your luck in trying to escape. Was there anyone else with you?"

"I was traveling with a man."

"Is that so... Unfortunately, we haven't found anybody else. He was probably stuck somewhere upstream. If he's your lover, you'd better give it up." Kashira offered words of sympathy.

But Shishou only answered, "He was pretty useful in many ways, but that's it."

It was a terribly dry response. The women walking behind her were surprised with her reply, and stared at her in wonder.

Little by little, the valley became wider. While walking on stones deliberately placed to serve as a passageway, Kashira continued her explanation.

"You may have guessed it already, but every one of us here were airheads who got swept away by the river... and were lucky enough to drift to that pond alive."

"I see," Shishou said as she flung the hair that stuck on her nape backwards. Then, "And I suppose it is impossible to get out of this place," she said

impassively, her expression as blank as ever.

The women around her were once again surprised by her cool-headedness.

Kashira confirmed her suspicion.

"You're taking this quite calmly... even though this should be pretty shocking news... I was even choosing my words carefully."

"As long as you're alive, you can do something. Right now I just want to grasp the situation."

"Quite the spirit you've got there, though you may not have lived an honest life... Oops! It's bad to talk about the past here. Not good, not good," Kashira said and stuck out her tongue. The other women smiled at her playful display.

"I'm not sure how long but, all of you have been living here, right? That means there's a place here where people can settle down, am I correct?" Master continued her calm discourse. Kashira nodded.

"Bingo. That smart head of yours saves us some time. We got swept into this place, and have been living here since."

"Have you tried getting out?"

"We wouldn't be here if it can be done. Want to know why it's impossible? It's because the current gets stronger the farther you go upstream, while left and right, there are these hundreds of meters high cliffs. And—"

At that moment, the group approached a part of the valley that bends greatly to the left.

The width of the valley expanded into about a hundred meters while the flow of the river has become gentler.

The gentler flow enabled earth and sand to collect by the riverside. Kashira and Shishou, who had been climbing over the rocks, finally felt their feet touching damp ground.

"And—, well it's better to see it with your own eyes. Look—"

Kashira carried on with her explanation as she proceeded, and upon turning left the valley became straight once more. And then the scenery beyond it

revealed itself.

A scenery that was reflected into Shishou's eyes.

The valley abruptly expanded into a wide area spanning three hundred meters. It was the widest part of the valley they have been in so far. The amount of sunlight that shone in from the sky increased, brightening up their surroundings.

At the center of the valley, the 300-meter wide river flowed leisurely. Left and right were sand and earth.

And various trees grew in the valley.

There were different kinds, but the most numerous breed of all was one peculiar to areas with hot climates—a tall tree with big leaves and fruits—a palm tree. The vivid green leaves grew all over the valley, as if concealing it.

Kashira stopped and stood by Shishou's side.

"See what lies beyond the valley for yourself."

As they commanded a view from their spot, they could see very well the 500-meter span of the cliffs, the valley and the river.

And then it abruptly disappears, with nothing but the blue sky beyond.

"I'm sure you know why it disappears."

"Because the land ends right there. Beyond it, there's probably an enormous waterfall. And further beyond, a sea," Shishou answered.

Kashira turned with a smile to the woman's calm face.

"Correct. And that's the third reason why you can't get out of here. — Welcome to our 'village'."

—

It was a place that can be aptly called 'edge of the world'.

Facing the expanse of a vast ocean, a huge rocky mountain that stood over a thousand meters soared vertically with the earth.

As the rocky mountain continues beyond the horizon, it was seemingly an impossible task to measure how wide an area the mountain spans.

And in this mountain, there was a lone rift.

Considering the enormity of the mountain, this rift was but paper-thin in comparison. And it was also only half as high as the mountain.

It was as if a fearful giant decided to slice the mountain with a saw and stopped midway.

From this gap, a river gushed out into a waterfall.

But after falling for quite some distance, the water is stirred and scattered by the wind. The breeze constantly blowing from the ocean clashes with the cliff, and continues its ascent to the top of the mountain.

And by the banks of the river that formed this waterfall was the shadow of a human.

—

“Everyone! We have a new face here! You can call her Shishou!”

Kashira stood before all the villagers and shouted.

They were in the lowest reaches of the valley river. With only a few palm trees growing, most of it was made up of the river and the white sand.

A little bit more downstream, the ground vanishes, and the rush of falling water resounded vaguely.

Seated atop the soft sand and looking at the two who stood by the edge of the river were dozens of adults and less than half that number of children.

“Shishou, these are the villagers. There are forty-nine adults, thirty-nine of which are women, and seventeen children,” Kashira explained.

The women sat together, all wearing shirts and shorts. If they were inside a country, they would surely be arrested for indecency.

No one seemed to be older than Kashira, with most of them looking to be around their twenties. Their features, complexions, and hair colors varied. The

only similarity they shared was that none of them were plump.

There were ten men, who had much more rugged looks as they were bare-chested and wore only shorts. They were around their twenties to thirties, all with muscular builds.

The children were half boys and half girls. Their ages also varied, from infancy to mid-teens. The little children were all naked, and those above ten years of age were barely clothed.

And so the men and the women looked at Shishou...

“Good thing you survived!”

“You may have mixed feelings right now, but we welcome you!”

“It will be all right! You have nothing to worry about!”

...and uttered warm words of encouragement before introducing themselves one by one.

“...”

Shishou, who had to hear sixty-six names in succession, only silently met their gazes and gave a small bow.

Kashira then spoke to Shishou. “I’m sure you can tell by looking at everyone, but there are few men in this village. Men and women alike drift to the ‘first pond’, but even though they’re not injured, it is the men who usually die. Maybe it’s because women have more fat in their bodies so they can withstand the cold more, and are able to float really well.”

“I see.”

“That’s why here, the women are the strong ones. A man who tries anything fishy to a woman gets beaten in no time. Not that the women here aren’t capable of doing the opposite—it can’t be helped. So I ask you not to torment the men too much, okay?”

Kashira laughed mischievously and the other women who were listening also giggled.

“Here, you are free to do whatever you want except for one thing. Do you

know what that is, Shishou?”

While being the center of everyone’s attention, Shishou answered readily, “Killing someone.”

“Exactly! The only thing we can’t permit anyone to do is to reduce the number of our comrades. Anyone who kills somebody shall be made to jump off that waterfall.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Even so, you’re one tough cookie. After drifting here, most would do nothing but cry in despair... I was like that at first too... I’m not going to try and make myself look good. But it is true that no one can get out of this place. You can’t climb the cliffs or the waterfall, and of course, leaping off that waterfall is out of the question.”

“I understand.”

“But it’s not difficult to live here. The leaves of the palm trees block rain and sun, and we have the soft sand as our bed. There are no dangerous animals or insects. There’s plenty of drinking water, and even when left on their own, the fish multiply and the palm trees bear fruit. As for clothes, we use those that drift into the pond from time to time; though we don’t know if they’re from luggage or corpses. And so here, we who have died once are given a chance to live anew. I doubt our families or acquaintances think we’re still alive, you see.”

Then Kashira urged Shishou to sit down. After Shishou sat with the villagers behind her, Kashira began to weave a tale. Of the history of the paradise.

And it goes like this.

As expected, among all of those present, Kashira lived in this place the longest.

About twenty years ago, the merchant truck she traveled with got swept away in the river. She was the only survivor.

The ones who saved her at the time—her ‘seniors’ so to speak—were five women.

They spent roughly thirty years in this place, and knew that it was impossible

to leave.

Of course they tried to go upstream. However, the ever-flowing current of the waterfall hindered their advance and drained all their hope.

They tried to form characters on the ground, or raise smoke towards anyone who might be atop the cliffs.

But they all knew that the chances of that happening are but a trifle. Who would make a trip into a land filled with rough jungle, when there are no countries nearby?

They also tried sending messages asking for help from the waterfall towards the ocean, but as there's no basin under the waterfalls, the messages probably couldn't drift towards the sea.

And within the paradise's fifty years of history, no one has come to save them. They never saw a ship sailing in the ocean either.

In the first place, no neighboring country was aware of the existence of this marvelous landscape. Who, other than a whimsical adventurer, would ever come upon such a place?"

In the end, they have abandoned trying all sorts of things, and they decided to just stay there. However, Kashira believed that people who would end up like her would grow in number.

Because of the lack of other paths, the number of people who crossed the river will increase. The more people crossing it, the more accidents there will be.

And it was just as Kashira feared. During her twenty-year stay, the population of the village grew.

Most of the seventeen children were born there. Kashira joked that every single night was tough for the first men who got rescued.

As there were very few men in the village, there was no such thing as a marriage system.

To put it nicely, it was free-for-all love. To put it bluntly, the men are owned by the women. A man invited by a woman cannot refuse. Not that they refused

in the first place.

And so, everyone is free to be together with anyone they like.

Consequently, no one could tell which child belongs to whom, and there was no need to know. The children are the village's treasures, and everyone gives their all to raise them with care.

No one knows what will become of this village in the future.

Even so, the villagers continued their daily lives.

—

After hearing the entire story,

"I understand it very well," Shishou said. She stood up, then approached the women listening to Kashira's story.

"I'm the newcomer. I am very much indebted to you," she introduced herself and bowed her head deeply.

This surprised the women, who then said things to her like, 'You don't have to go that far', or 'We're all friends here,' in a humbled manner.

Then Shishou took off her jacket, placed it by their feet, and searched its pocket for something.

She took out her hand, now clutching something.

"I offer this as a gift to everyone. It is something that is no longer of use to me."

She opened her palm and showed the item to all the women, including Kashira.

The next moment, the expressions of the women transformed. At the same time, they sighed, as if in a trance.

On Shishou's hand was a large brooch.

Embellished with plenty of jewels, the beautiful, glittering brooch was a most extravagant piece of ornament. If the jewels were authentic, it is impossible to tell how much value it carries.

Shishou explained as she surveyed the women's faces.

"This is something I stole from the treasure room of a certain country. Apparently, it had more value than I initially thought. So people of that country came after my life, and as a result, I fell into the river."

While looking at the women's distraught faces—whether out of sympathy or pity— Shishou continued her explanation.

"I desired it so much, but now my efforts are all in vain. I now loathe looking at it."

Even though she said this, not one woman volunteered to keep it.

Everyone turned to the silent Kashira, awaiting her judgment.

"Shishou.... You've brought quite an extravagant item. You see, we have long parted ways with our own treasures. Everyone will be enticed by it, and would dream of having it, knowing full well that such a thing will make no difference. Now what am I to do...?"

Seeing that Kashira herself was at a lost, Shishou suggested, "Then how about this... I shall keep, but never wear it. It shall belong to the village, and will be worn by someone only on their special occasion."

Kashira slapped her knee.

"That's a great idea! Let's do that! No one should have complaints, then? This shall not belong to just one person!"

And as no one raised any complaints, the matter was settled peacefully. After this, Shishou looked once again at the women, then returned the brooch to her jacket.

And then,

"AAAH! AAAAAAAAH! AAAAAAAH! AAAAAAAAH!"

She suddenly screamed. Then she collapsed to the sandy beach, and while facing up, flailed her arms and legs wildly.

Everyone, including Kashira, was surprised over such a show of hysterics, but no one stopped her. They let Shishou do as she pleased.

For about twenty seconds, she looked up towards the piece of blue sky that can be seen beyond the lofty cliffs, and thrashed her arms and legs again and again.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Her long, piercing scream resounded one last time.

“...”

And then she stopped moving.

Kashira stood beside her with a kind smile and offered her a hand.

“That made you feel better? Feel like choosing your bed now?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Shishou answered, grasped tightly the hand offered to her, and stood up from the sand.

— —

The next day.

Shishou woke up at dawn.

In this place, the temperature doesn't go down much even during the evening. Even when one slept naked, there wouldn't be any problem.

Over the soft sand, the leaves of the palm trees spread several times over served as comfortable beds. If the leaves get damaged or damp, they can be replaced as many times as needed.

Shishou wasn't the only one awake. Once the world has become brighter, everyone woke up naturally. It was the beginning of a day in the village.

The women proceeded with their deeds at the lowest part of the waterfalls, in an area where they wouldn't fall. They washed their faces and bodies.

Out of some form of reservation, the men waited for all the women to finish before using the same place for the same purpose.

In the village, they ate two meals a day, consisting of palm fruit and fish.

They drank the contents of the palm fruit, and ate the fruits after splitting them in half.

Upstream, weirs (devices that can be used to capture fish in the current) made of assembled stones captured fish, so a person need only go there and seize one with their bare hands.

They created fire with flints, and built campfires using dried palm husks and branches for fuel.

The grilling process only consisted of removing the scales and entrails of the fish, wrapping them in moist palm leaves, and throwing them to the fire. They used the rock salt that comes off from the cliff for seasoning.

Some kind of fruit also grew there in small amounts, of which they ate the ripe ones little by little.

There was little variety in the meals, but it was enough to support their numbers. It can probably support approximately twice as much people.

During the previous day's dinner,

"I would like to be on my own for now," Shishou said, and did not join in with the others. But that morning, she mingled with the women to chat.

In a village where there's very little to amuse one's self with, a newcomer's stories are extremely valuable.

Badgered by everyone, Shishou eventually talked about her personal experiences as a traveler.

Stealing, robbing, killing and almost getting killed; they were nothing but tales of extreme and interesting adventures.

No matter which way one looks at it, this woman called Shishou made by no means an honest living, but none of that mattered anymore once she came to this village.

Be it women, men, or children, their eyes glittered in excitement as they listened to the stories told indifferently by Shishou.

That day passed with them doing nothing else.

About halfway through the day,

“Now, let me tell you about my latest adventure—”

Shishou began recounting the tale about the brooch she has stolen.

It was around thirty-five days before.

In a certain kingdom, a terrible power struggle raged on.

When the previous king fell off a horse and died unexpectedly, deciding on who shall inherit the throne became a serious problem.

Normally, the right of succession was settled without any challenge. As the country has enjoyed peace for a long time, it was an unwritten rule that the heir shall be named at the moment the previous king retires.

But power drives people mad. The king’s siblings, children, and cousins all aimed for the crown and plunged themselves into a cycle of assassination.

People who descended from the royal family ‘mysteriously’ died of natural causes or accidents one after another.

Some fellow coughed blood after eating his favorite dish. One cracked his skull from tumbling down the stairs. Somebody was discovered floating in his bathtub, while another died of flames that spread from his hearth.

And while the citizens grew more alarmed of the dispute among members of the royal family, Shishou and the man that accompanied her entered the country.

In the middle of the continuing mayhem in the royal palace, they readily invaded its treasure room and carried off piles upon piles of the royal family’s treasures.

Some of it they gave away to the citizens who happened to witness them. Of course, the people rejoiced at the appearance of such chivalrous thieves.

And then they made their escape from the country. However, it seems that they were seen while they were distributing the loot, and they were identified from their physical descriptions. Ironically, the royal family united in that instant and began an obstinate chase for the thieves.

The moment they realized that they have taken too much, it was already too late.

Their evasion went on for days. The pursuit became increasingly intense by the day, until they finally decided to do the unreasonable—to cross the high waters of a river with their tiny car—and became swept away as a result.

And so it has come to this. The end.

She looked at the applauding audience who found her story amusing, and said,

“I am happy that I was able to entertain you.”

—

That evening,

After finishing dinner, all that was left was to go to bed once the sun sets.

“...”

Shishou, who still wore her shirt and trousers, silently headed over to the center of the valley right beside the river, and lay face up on the sandy beach. Without minding the sand that clung to her body, she moved her arms and legs.

As none of the villagers understood what this meant, they just let Shishou do as she wished.

Save for one woman.

—

“Shishou...”

A woman approached Shishou, who has stopped her suspicious motions, but remained looking at the dim sky.

She was around her late twenties.

Like the other women, she wore only shorts and a shirt that covered nothing but her breasts. Her sunburnt skin was pale brown, and her tawny, long hair

was tied behind her.

She had a short stature, with sweet facial features. She had a delicate ambience about her, a characteristic rare among the women of the village who were manly in either appearance or in spirit.

“ ... ”

Shishou silently and slowly got up. White sand fell in large drops from her hair and back.

“You’re Luise, am I correct?” Shishou said.

The woman called Luise, astonished that Shishou was able to remember the names of over sixty people, whispered apologetically, “Yes... I have a request...”

As there was nobody else near them, they could have spoken normally without anybody hearing, but Luise’s manner was that of someone frightened of something.

“What is it?” Without any change from her expression, Shishou replied firmly.

Then Luise requested with utmost courtesy, “Um, that brooch... will you let me see it...?”

“Because it’s now the property of the whole village, I can’t just decide on my own—”

Shishou began words to turn her request down, then discreetly looked at her surroundings and sat atop the sand.

“Please sit down as well.”

Luise obeyed, and Shishou took out the aforementioned brooch from her pants pocket, carefully concealed by her hands.

Then she dug at the sand between them, and placed it within. With this, it would seem as if they were merely talking to each other while seated.

“T-thank you...,” Luise uttered her gratitude.

Shishou looked at the woman who stared at the brooch.

It was not the gaze of someone who merely yearned to look at a pretty trinket.

She had the expression of someone who was looking at a terrifying apparition. However, she did not avert her gaze.

Time passed peacefully, and the sky steadily grew darker.

As most of the valley faced south, the evening sun cannot be seen from the bottom of the valley. It has probably already descended below the western sky, which was invisible to them.

Luise continued to gaze at the brooch until it was completely dark, when,

“Do you want to keep it just for tonight?” Shishou said this.

“Huh?! —Oh, no! No...”

Luise who was pulled back to reality said in refusal, at the same time drawing away her body. Soon she turned around, stood up, and ran as if trying to escape.

“...”

Shishou quietly looked at the woman until she vanished, then eventually stood up.

“Now, how about I go to sleep too.”

She grasped the brooch in her hand, and walked towards her leafy bed.

—

The next day.

It was the morning of the third day since Shishou became among the dwellers of the village.

Like the day before, the morning passed the way it had for decades in this village.

The sky beyond the tall, tall walls was as clear and as blue as it was before.

That morning, Shishou lay face up once more over the sand, flapping her arms and legs.

Kashira came and stood beside her,

“You’re exercising? Maybe I should join too,” she said with a laugh.

“ ... ”

Luise stood quietly by Kashira’s side,

Shishou raised her face, “I’ll tell you about it eventually.”

“That’s great. Do you want to take a shot at it too?”

Luise answered the question with a tiny voice, “If you ask me to, Kashira...”

Kashira’s face soured, “Luise... There you go again. You’re not my slave. Not all of my words are commands. You should say ‘no way!’ to me sometimes, you know? Why not try it?”

“ ... ”

“Gah! We should do something about that! It’s been half a year since you came here. You should be more honest with yourself. You might just become the boss in the future, you know?”

Luise’s eyes widened at Kashira’s words. Then she uttered out with difficulty, “Me...? The boss...? That’s... I’m not suited for it... I can’t possibly lead people... It’s impossible for me...”

“Pretty weak personality, huh? —Say Luise, we may have died once, but we were saved. Think of it as being reborn so you could cast away your weak, past self, and live more passionately this time around! Okay?” Kashira’s bright voice resounded.

“ ... ”

However, Luise hung her head down, and remained silent.

“I guess it will take a while, huh.”

With a smile, Kashira shrugged her shoulder. And then,

“But I’m sure someday you’ll get to say ‘no way!’”

And showed her a toothy smile.

—

Everyone partook in their daily tasks, prepared breakfast, ate, then threw the dregs to the waterfalls. After clearing away everything, they had nothing else to do until evening.

In this village, they worked for a total of three hours, then do whatever they want for the rest of the day.

“In a sense, it’s easy. It was much, much easier compared to when I worked as a cook for merchants. There’s plenty of spare time.”

And just like a woman said to Shishou, each and every one had plenty of free time.

Some swam, others sang. The ones who had excess energy played with the children. There are people who made things out of the limited materials and tools in their reach, like clothes made of leaves and containers made of wood.

To stave off boredom, some would walk up to the ‘first pond’.

Once a day, someone would go there to see if there were things or people that drifted in. But then, it’s not so often that someone or something would wash ashore.

And so, Shishou,

“ ... ”

Spent her time lying in the middle of the valley near the beach, just as she did in the morning,

“ ... ”

And would silently and expressionlessly flail her arms and legs.

——

Noon.

There was not a single cloud in the sky, and the rays of the sun were intense. It was a time when the sun was at the top of the valley, radiating its light down without mercy.

Even so, near the water’s surface, the temperature was moderate and cool,

and the wind that passes through the valley from the sea was pleasant. It was the perfect time and place for a nap.

While most of the villagers slumbered under the shade of the trees, there was a person who walked amidst them.

It was Shishou.

She was wearing her boots, her jacket atop her shirt and her long, black hair tied neatly behind her.

Along with her faint footsteps on the sand, Shishou walked beneath the palm trees, and stood before one person among all of the sleeping villagers.

It was Luise.

She lay sideways on top of a palm leaf, sleeping like a child.

“...”

Shishou silently looked down, then suddenly pulled her body face up—

And landed a strong punch to her stomach.

—

Shishou carried Luise, who wasn't even able to cry out in agony, atop her shoulder, and walked towards the village.

The moment she appeared from under the trees and walked towards the sandy beach,

“Hey, what's the matter?”

They were seen by someone, as to be expected.

“...”

Shishou ignored the woman who tried to talk to her, and kept on walking in a brisk pace.

“W-wait! —Everyone! Come here!”

The woman shouted and kicked up a fuss in no time.

The women as well as the men chased after Shishou who was walking

downstream.

“Hey! Shishou! Hold it!”

“...”

Shishou turned around to the voices who were calling for her to halt, and put down Luise at her feet. She didn't let her go sloppily, but carefully laid her down face up on top of the sand.

“Uh... **cough*! *cough*!*”

Luise coughed violently.

“Huh...?”

Then she noticed the fact that she was moved while she was asleep.

She raised her face and body, and saw, first, the back of Shishou, and beyond her, the glaring villagers.

They were about ten meters apart.

—

Facing the approaching villagers,

“Please do not come any closer! I don't want any of you to get hurt!” Shishou shouted out.

“Haaaah!”

Along with a yell, she swished her hands in a mysterious manner.

Then she began a strange dance, as if performing a ritual for offering a sacrifice to an evil god. But it also seemed like the dance of someone who has lost her mind.

And finally, she struck a pose, with her right hand raised to the air, and her left hand pointing to the watching villagers. Depending on the way one looked at it, it can probably be considered an awesome pose. However,

“I kept it a secret from everyone until now, but I'm actually a witch. If you come any closer, I shall drill a hole in your feet with my lightning magic.”

With a cold expression, Shishou said this, leaving everyone, including Kashira at the front, with mouths hanging open.

Several moments of awkwardness passed by.

“Poor Shishou... the shock of coming here has broken her mind...” Kashira said calmly. Conclusively. Everyone behind her nodded in agreement. They turned sympathetic faces towards Shishou.

“Seize her without hurting her any more than necessary,” Kashira ordered the brawny men who stood at the back.

“Got it,” “Yeah,” the men replied, and as ordered, approached Shishou to seize her. And the instant they advanced three steps,

“I warned you.”

Shishou moved her pointing finger towards the advancing men,

“Hah!”

And let out a yell as she brought down her right hand.

The next moment, sand burst up like a water fountain before the eyes of the man who led the advance.

It was around one meter high.

Along with a high-pitched blast, the sand surged upwards, and a hole thirty centimeters in diameter was created one step in front of the man.

“Eek!”

The man faltered and stopped in his tracks.

“That’s not all!”

Shishou’s voice continued, along with the movement of her right hand that seemed to throw something,

At that moment,

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!

Sand pillars appeared one after another, stopping the men’s advance.

The youngest-looking among the men was completely terrified, and fell on his

back.

The women watching around also widened their eyes,

“D-don’t tell me she’s really a witch...,” someone muttered.

“T-that’s impossible...,” another one muttered in disbelief, but after this, no one else continued to speak.

The men were completely terrified, and took several steps back. At that moment, Kashira stepped forward.

Kashira slowly walked towards Shishou until they were only five meters apart.

“Oh witch, would you allow me to speak to you?” She said with a grin.

Shishou lowered the outstretched finger of her left hand, and brought her right hand down with a twirl.

She took a momentary glance behind her.

“ ... ”

Still seated, Luise stared at her as if she was looking at a monster.

When Shishou finally turned towards Kashira, Kashira smirked,

“Shishou... you came here on purpose didn’t you?”

—

The clamor that arose among the villagers was like a storm in the middle of a forest.

It is only to be expected, as there was not one person among them who have come to that place of their own accord.

And they would never have imagined it possible.

“H-how in the world...? W-what for...?”

Someone unintentionally voiced out the question in the minds of everybody present there, except for Shishou.

“ ... ”

But Shishou did not answer. Instead, Kashira,

“Well, you’ve come here one way or the other... to get saved by us in the end. It’s not entirely impossible to come here in one piece if you dressed up in some sort of warm clothing and let yourself drift in a weak current,” she said with a grin.

“That’s correct,” Shishou, who she did not think would reply, answered readily. “There’s this outfit called a ‘wetsuit’ that is worn by people whose work involved submerging in water. It enables the wearer to keep their body temperature stable for a long period of time. After that I only have to wear some sort of helmet and protective gear, and dive feet first into the waterfall. It’s a technique I observed in a certain country for a hobby called ‘canyoneering’. I intentionally came just upstream of that pond, then changed clothes.”

Between Shishou, who explained everything with indifference, and the speechless villagers,

“You’ve got some pluck! One mistake and you would have been delivered to us a corpse. So... your target is Luise, am I right?” Kashira said and Shishou nodded deeply.

“Luise came here half a year ago. Because she doesn’t speak about herself at all, we don’t know how it happened. And we didn’t pry too much.”

Kashira turned towards the now completely terrified Luise, and gave her a wink. And then,

“You can’t just take Luise with you because you feel like it. She’s an important friend to us. She’s a kind and good-natured person, someone who this village can depend on in the future.”

And then, Shishou asked, “Oh really? I thought I could do anything I wish except for ‘murder’?”

“What you’re doing now is no different from that. You’ll end up killing her if you try to leave this place. You can’t climb the waterfall carrying Luise. Do you want to die together? Don’t tell me you can fly?”

“Of course. I’m a witch after all.”

Voices of confusion resounded behind Kashira. However,

“That’s a lie,” she declared, and confidently added, “You’re nothing like a witch.”

And intensified the racket among the villagers gathered behind her.

“That trick a while ago? You probably have a partner above the cliffs firing a persuader (note: a gun) with a device that can silence the shot. And you must be instructing your partner by moving your hands. Those strange movements you’ve been doing since the day before last weren’t for exercise. It’s all clear to me now. Those must be signals for that person who was watching from the top of the cliffs.”

The villagers expressed their awe at the revelation. It all made sense to them.

Then everyone craned their necks with all their might, and looked at the rift between the cliffs.

But only the dazzling rays of the sunlight leaped to their eyes.

—

“Oh? We’ve been exposed already?”

A man muttered to himself.

It was a slightly short, but handsome young man. He was wearing overalls disguised in the same shade of color as the rocks.

The man was on his two feet, standing perpendicularly with the side of the cliffs. His face and body aimed directly towards the ground several hundreds of meters below.

Normally, he should have fallen already.

To avoid that, his waist and chest were secured with a sturdy harness, which was connected by several ropes to a stake nailed into the top of the cliffs.

He was like a spider.

And he was holding an enormous rifle that was tied the same way so that it wouldn’t fall.

It was a 12.7-mm automatic persuader. It is a heavy firearm of a very high caliber.

The long cylinder was attached to its tip was the sound silencer that supresses the sound of the shot. So that the empty cartridges do not fall into the valley, it was attached with a string bag that catches the bullet casings.

The man was looking at the ground directly beneath, several hundred meters away, through a high-powered scope. While preparing to shoot at any moment's notice,

"I wonder if this is the first time I can shoot without estimating the fall of the bullet?" He muttered cheerily.

When shooting horizontally, one only needs to aim upwards and estimate the fall of the bullet corresponding with the distance from the target. But when aiming directly below, there is no need for such a thing.

The man moved the scope's aim from the numerous faces looking up at him, towards the two women holding their fort downstream.

—

"Say, Shishou."

Kashira's voice was of mixed excitement and amusement, but also of an ominous tone.

"I have no idea how your friend managed to go up there. It sure is a good strategy... up until this point."

"..."

Still quiet, Shishou kept an eye on both Kashira and Luise behind her.

"But you know... What if after risking your neck to get to this place, you found that Luise's not here?" Kashira asked. From her noticeable rough breathing, it seems that she really wanted to know the answer.

"I have no idea whether Luise is dead or alive. I couldn't tell you guys apart just looking from above. And so I decided to come here. That is all," Shishou answered.

“Well what do I say! —You really *are* one tough cookie!” Kashira said with gleaming eyes, then, “But we now know that you’re not a witch. If you have a way to get out of this place, you’re free to go. On your own. Luise says she doesn’t want to come back, right Luise?” Kashira called out towards Luise herself, who was already convulsing in nervousness.

“!”

Luise’s reaction was that of shock.

Luise, who has never gone against whatever Kashira said, gasped a few times, and then,

“Y-ye...”

“No!”

The defying words that subdued Luise’s reply was Shishou’s.

“Luise wants to return to the country. There’s plenty of reason for her to do so. Please listen well to what I am going to say.”

“Oh...? Are those your magic spells, witch? Shall we hear them?”

Kashira’s narrowed her eyes.

Shishou took out the brooch from her pocket. She dropped it in front of Luise. It fell on top of the sand without a sound.

“That’s the brooch from the other day, right? It belongs to everyone in this village,” Kashira said.

To this, Shishou shook her head sideways. “No, that’s wrong. This belongs to Luise.”

“What?”

“She is the only one who has the right to keep this.”

“Why?”

Without answering Kashira’s question, Shishou wordlessly looked at Luise face to face, bent down on one leg, and bowed her head on top of her knee. Upon seeing this, a wave of excitement swept through the group led by Kashira.

And then Shishou, with a voice clear enough for everybody to hear, declared,
“Your majesty! Please accept this and return to your people! Everyone is waiting for your return!”

—

“Your... majesty...?”

With her eyes wide open, Luise’s mouth flapped open and close,

“Does... that... mean.... No...”

Her words came out one syllable at a time.

Shishou raised her face and made a small nod as she met Luise’s gaze. And then she clearly stated,

“That’s right, your majesty. —No one is left. *No one is left*,” Shishou reiterated.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Luise screamed.

“Unbelievable! Unbelievable! What an outrage!”

Luise continued to scream as she pulled at her hair.

Her scream rang throughout the valley, and echoed on everybody’s earlobes.

“W-wait a minute! What’s happening!” Kashira herself cried out in confusion.

“Aaaaah...”

Luise threw her head towards the sky and tears poured down from the corner of her eyes.

Shishou remained on her knees, and with only her face directed towards Kashira,

“Yesterday, I told you about the country where I got the brooch, right?”

“Y-yeah.... I remember that.”

“The assassinations went on in that country. Eventually a civil war broke over

possession of the crown. Imperial guards from different factions stormed the royal palace with weapons and started a killing spree.”

“And so?”

“As a result, a large fire engulfed the royal palace. Even so, the killings continued. They prioritized the murder of rival heirs over fighting the fire and rescuing victims.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“And so, the royal palace was turned to ashes. Not one member of the royal family remained. Both young and old perished in either the killings or in the fire. Except for one—the one who hated the dispute more than anybody else, the one who decided to throw away her status and country and went on a journey—the princess who attempted to end her life by drowning herself in a river.”

“... Ah! That’s it...,” Kashira finally realized. “You are saying that Luise is the princess who attempted to kill herself!”

She looked at Shishou who nodded in affirmation, and Luise, whose face was still lifted to the sky with her eyes closed.

“Unbelievable...”

For Kashira and the other villagers, it was more than enough evidence.

Shishou continued, “And so, Luise, no... Princess Veronique is the only surviving member of the royal family. And upon her people’s will, has been elevated as Her Majesty the Queen Veronique.”

“... Luise... a queen...”

Kashira somehow managed to support herself from dizziness.

“The mission I have undertaken is the search and rescue of the new queen. Her people believed from the bottom of their hearts that she was still alive. That their god has not yet taken her,” Shishou went on.

“And so they amassed a fortune for us travelers to accept this job—to find and save her. Afterwards, they wish for her to rebuild the peaceful royal family as it was before.”

Shishou pointed at the brooch on top of the sand.

“That brooch is something that is installed in the mantle of a newly enthroned monarch. It is the mark of their venerable ruler. Under normal circumstances, it will be stored in a heavily guarded storehouse in a basement. Even at the height of a riot, it is not something that a mere outsider like me could steal.”

“Ah... my people... even though I have abandoned them... even though I have forsaken my own life... for them to go this far to look for me...”

From Luise’s mouth these words flowed, just as both her eyes flooded with tears like waterfalls.

And amidst everyone’s silence,

“Now then,”

Shishou raised her right hand and moved it as if writing something in the air.

—

“Oops, there’s our signal.”

The man suspended from the top of the cliffs grabbed the ropes of a big knapsack hanging next to him.

“There you go.”

Using a big knife he extracted from his waist, he completely severed the ropes that held the sack.

The big knapsack came plummeting at once five hundred meters towards the ground.

“Don’t fall on anyone’s head, ok?” The man muttered.

—

“I can understand that much... but how are you planning to leave this place, Shishou?”

“I will use that.”

In response to Kashira's question, Shishou pointed upwards without even looking above her.

"That?"

Kashira and everybody else looked up to the sky and saw the falling knapsack.

The knapsack was free-falling at an intense speed. What was a tiny dot only a moment ago, suddenly became bigger...

"Aaaah!"

...making everyone shriek in panic. Just when they were about to run away, an umbrella opened behind the sack, along with the sound of trembling air.

A round parachute installed on the knapsack opened when it was about two hundred meters away from the bottom.

Of course it was calculated. To open a parachute, it is necessary to pull a cord; in this case, one that is three hundred meters long.

"Oh, that went well even though we haven't tested it."

The man looking down from above had a satisfied look on his face.

While being swayed upstream by the wind, the knapsack slowly fell to the bottom of the valley.

As it seems about to fall nearer to the villagers than to Shishou,

"I have a request. I don't care who it is, just take that bag here. If you refuse, I'll order my partner above to shoot you in the head."

No one dared refused the request that sounded more like a threat.

Two men who were exactly at the drop point of the bag grabbed it in the air. They took it and nervously passed by Kashira's side.

And then, they left it roughly three meters in front of Shishou, and quickly ran away.

Shishou stood up and approached the bag and briskly pulled out its contents.

First was something similar to the one used by the man above, harnesses to wrap around the body. For two people.

And then, the object that occupied half the space of the knapsack—another knapsack.

“...”

Without knowing what they’re about to do, Kashira and the villagers only watched attentively.

“Now, please stand up, your majesty,” Shishou said with a forceful tone as she picked up the brooch with her right hand and pulled Luise with her left hand.

Luise obeyed, her eyes still full of tears.

Shishou stowed the brooch in her pocket and closed its lid.

She coiled the harness around Luise’s feet, waist and shoulders. Afterwards, she did the same to herself.

Finally, Shishou wore the knapsack on her back, and firmly installed the belt extending from it to her and to Luise’s harnesses with a metal hook.

“Please march on, your highness.”

And while keeping Luise close in front of her, they proceeded on the beach towards the waterfall.

“Wha—!”

Surprised, Kashira tried to run after them, but did not leap and try to stop them.

While preserving the several meters distance, she looked at the backs of the two as they walked away.

—

Five hundred meters above,

“Don’t come any closer than that.”

The man above the cliffs muttered, all the while preparing for a shot. Being hit at the limbs by a shot coming directly from above would not end in just an injury.

In the first place, a bullet from a rifle of this caliber will blow a person to bits, regardless of where it hits.

Fortunately, none of the villagers tried to capture the two.

—

Shishou and Luise eventually arrived as close as possible to the edge of the cliff, so close they could feel the echoes of the waterfall in their bellies.

Only three meters from the big rock they were stepping on was the sky.

The strong sea breeze hit the two and slightly rocked their bodies.

Shishou turned around and called out to Kashira and the villagers who then stopped on their tracks.

“It was but a while, but I thank you for looking after me.”

After the brief salutation, she pulled on the string of the knapsack on her back.

Upon doing so, the cover of the knapsack opened, releasing a spring-loaded bundle of cloth. The bright pink cloth formed a square shaped kite, which caught the sea breeze.

The kite soared further up, drawing out the contents of the knapsack with a cord.

The strong wind blew from the sea.

And gave birth to wings.

What’s inside was an extremely wide parachute. It was a beautifully-arched dome made of pure white cloth.

This cloth was linked with a thin cord to the knapsack and to the harnesses, which was in turn connected to the backs of the two women.

Upon witnessing the enormous wings unfold before their eyes,

“Wow...”

Kashira and the villagers were again caught in an uproar.

Shishou turned her head upwards, and checked if the cord tied with the parachute was entangled or not. Upon ascertaining that everything works perfectly, Shishou lifted her arms and grasped the cloth grips with both hands.

“This is my last magic trick. It’s called a paraglider. It was invented in a certain mountainous country. When I remembered that, I quickly summoned it here for this mission.”

She faced Kashira and declared her final stunt.

“Farewell, everyone.”

While walking on the opposite direction as the paraglider that would take them to air, Shishou pushed Luise from the belly and chest, and slowly proceeded forward.

“Luise!”

Kashira shouted with the loudest voice she has ever mustered.

“...”

Luise, still tied together with Shishou, looked back over her shoulder towards Kashira.

“Luise! You still have lots of things left to do! Please live! And never come back! To this village! Forget everything! —This is my first and final order to you!”

Shishou started running as fast as her legs could go.

She planned to jump at the moment that Luise looked back.

Being pushed forward, Luise advanced towards the cliffs still facing backwards. And then they suddenly jumped in mid-air.

Along with the wings, the two women parted from the ground, and were carried aloft by the wind.

“...”

Luise gazed at the valley.

And at the waterfalls.

She looked at her fellow villagers, who were also looking at her.

Then she looked at Kashira, who had a forlorn smile on her face. She breathed in as much air as she could, then yelled,

“NO WAY!”

“Grandma... what happened after to the woman who was saved?” the little girl asked the woman who told her the story.

A wide smile graced the wrinkled face of the old woman, who answered, “The rescued Luise returned to her country and fulfilled her duties, this time without running away. She became a brilliant queen. She made many people happy, and was loved by them in return.”

“That’s a strange story.... Will you tell me about it again...?”

“I’ll tell you as many times as you like. It’s time to rest. Now, sleep like your eyes are glued shut.”

“Okay... But I have one last question. Why do you know that story, grandma?”

“I’ll tell you about that some other time. Good night.”

“Mm... all right. Good night.”

—

The old woman whispered to her granddaughter, who has already fallen asleep.

“Why I know that story? ...It’s because I was there.”

The old woman raised her face, her eyes seeing not the ceiling of the room, but the form of the queen being rescued by the winged witch. The queen was yelling something.

“You see that queen... she didn’t listen to me. She asked Shishou and her people to save the paradise-dwellers, and invited everyone to her country. And so that no person will ever drift into that village again, she ordered a strong bridge to be built over the river...”

The old woman returned her gaze to her granddaughter’s sleeping face.

“And as for me, I was exiled from paradise. And in exchange of the name I have lost, I helped myself to the name of that witch.”

Kashira, who now goes by the name Shishou, grinned.

“Indeed, it’s an old, old story.”

Translator’s Notes

1. [Jump up ↑](#) *Kashira* (頭) literally means ‘head’ but also means ‘leader’, ‘boss’, etc. For this chapter, I’ll stick with ‘Kashira’ and ‘Shishou’ (used strictly as a name in this chapter).



第八話

「恋愛禁止の国」
— the Prohibition —

Chapter 8: “A Land Forbidding Love” — the Prohibition —

A motorrad (note: a motorcycle. Only to mean that it cannot fly) was running along a road inside a forested mountain.

It was the season for vivid foliage; the pause in the middle of summer and spring.

The contrast between the evergreens and deciduous trees painted the stretch of low mountains in a verdant mosaic—the bright green of deciduous trees against the dark-hued evergreens.

The white, sinewy clouds floated high above the perfectly clear blue morning sky.

Such scenery offered itself from both sides of the narrow road that sewed its way through the gently-sloping surface of the mountain. The motorrad leisurely made its way atop the reddish-brown dirt road that was slushy in places.

There were two black boxes on both sides of its rear wheel, on top of which was a traveling bag tied on its carrier.

Its rider was still young, somewhere around mid-teens.

She wore a brown coat, the extra-long hems of which were rolled up to her thighs. She had on a brimmed hat with flaps that covered her ears, as well as silver-framed goggles.

“This road gives us a wonderful view,” the rider muttered as she viewed the mountains on the right side. Then she added, “Master used to say a lot that ‘places with wonderful scenery are filled only with wonderful people... not.’”

“Not!” the motorrad cried out in amazement. “Wait, Kino, if we were in a manga, this would be a silly scene you know! Should I let my tires slip?”

“Nope, that won’t be necessary. —Well, it only means that appearance of a place has nothing to do with the nature of the people living in it, Hermes.”

After the rider called Kino said this, the motorrad called Hermes then asked, “So, any news about the country we’re heading to?”

Kino promptly answered, “About the country at the end of this road, the merchants I met in the previous country said...”

“Uh-huh, said what?”

“That they don’t know much about it.”

“Huh? Why?”

As they were approaching a sharp curve, Kino reduced the speed in order to avoid falling at the slope on the right side, and passed through the curve as carefully as possible.

And only then did she continue, “It seems that out of desire to isolate their country, they don’t allow any outsiders to get in.”

“Oh? Then what about the merchants?”

“Outside the walls, there is a separate confined area reserved for transactions with foreigners. That’s where the goods are delivered and payment change hands. Outsiders can also be allowed to stay there if it’s really needed. That’s why they have no idea either what kind of place it is, much less the reason why things are that way.”

“Heh. So Kino, is that ‘confined area’ our destination?”

“Of course not. The story isn’t finished yet. They said that for some reason, the rule has changed, and they have opened the country to the rest of the world, allowing outsiders to come in.”

“Ah, I see! I’ve got a few things figured out.”

“Oh, like what?”

Hermes answered, “It’s not that hard to guess. First, as you can see yourself, this road is narrow and it’s easy to make a mistake and fall off that slope. This isn’t the kind of place merchants who ride in trucks would love to go to. All the more when the news of the country’s opening is only a rumor. That’s why *you* would go in their place to see if the country has really opened, and find out what kind of things would sell or can be bought there. If necessary, you’ll buy a

sample, return to the previous country and sell the information to the merchants! I've uncovered the conspiracy!"

"Great detective work, Hermes. —While it's not exactly a conspiracy, that's the gist of it," Kino said with a nod.

"Uh-huh, you greedy creature. Travelers aren't spies or anything, you know."

"But if I make some money out of it, I can buy all sorts of new parts for you, Hermes."

"Ah, splendid! Travelers are born to be spies. Sometimes."

"Then let's leave it at that. —Look, there it is."

After getting across a mountain pass, Kino and Hermes saw the walls of the country within the valley.

The walls of pure white shone and glittered amidst the mosaic of green.

"Wow, that's one pretty fence. It's probably made of marble."

"Yeah, it's really beautiful. Now... what kind of country could this one be? I'm so excited. But before everything else, it would be nice if the news of its opening is true."

"We've got to get in there no matter what it takes—"

And so Kino and Hermes began their descent of the gentle slopes.

— —

"Yes, it is true that our country has been isolated until twenty-nine days ago. But now it's all right for you to enter."

Before the shining white walls, Kino was informed thus by a middle-aged immigration inspector.

"A'right!" Hermes cheered from behind.

As usual, Kino asked for a three-day stay for the purpose of rest and sightseeing. And on the condition that they would obey the laws inside the country, they were given permission to enter.

“I’m going to say it in advance. There’s nothing interesting in this country, you see? There’s nothing in it. Well, whatever, take your time,” the inspector said with genuine boredom while handing the permit to Kino.

Afterwards, Kino pushed Hermes and proceeded through the tunnel in the walls.

Apparently, it was too much of a trouble to open the heavy, enormous gates just for a single motorrad to enter, and so they were made to use the tunnel that served as a passageway for people.

“Honestly, it’s just as fun this way.”

“Yeah! The scenery upon coming out of that tunnel was really great!”

Kino and Hermes said.

They finally arrived inside the country after exiting the long tunnel.

The ‘confined area’ the merchants mentioned was merged with the rest of the country by having its inner walls completely demolished.

And as he looked at the place that resembled a protruding navel, Hermes muttered.

“Yup, that's pretty interesting.”

—

Kino and Hermes drove around the country.

Neither too wide or too small, the interior, just like in any other country, had fields at the outer circle, with the number of houses increasing as one approaches the center. And finally, the town at the center had a tall building at its very middle.

The buildings were made of stone, which were indeed marble as Hermes said. Even though marble is typically used as a high class building material in other countries, here it was consumed as if it were mud or sand. They glittered in whiteness, and the patterns, upon a closer look, were really beautiful.

The country’s level of technology was held back, and there were but a few

automobiles running about. Perhaps due to a small population, the place can by no means be described as flourishing.

Both in the fields and downtown, Kino and Hermes garnered the gazes of the citizens. But while that may be true, they were neither surrounded nor followed around, and were only gazed at from a distance like objects of curiosity.

Even when they stopped by a restaurant to eat lunch, at a time when there were plenty of other customers, nobody bothered to accompany Kino. They only stared, as if they were beholding an exotic animal in a zoo.

“This country was simpler than I thought, Kino,” Hermes who waited alone in the parking lot expressed his sincere impressions.

Kino answered while she topped her black jacket with her brown coat.

“Maybe it’s just their national character? By the way, the main course—steamed vegetables with only salt and pepper as flavoring—was very simple, but very delicious.”

“Not that anyone can trust your definition of ‘delicious’, Kino.”

“Really?”

Kino straddled over Hermes and put on her goggles.

They used up half of the afternoon touring around the country, visiting sixty percent of the area with disinterest.

At the northernmost part of the country was a stone excavation site that would be the envy of other countries for its production of high quality marble, which was mined mostly through manual labor.

“Kino, I’m sure that would sell! Why don’t we take some with us?”

“That won’t do. We’ve got to look for something smaller and lighter.”

In the end Kino and Hermes arrived at the establishment recommended to them by the immigration inspector, the one and only hotel in the country.

It stood alone at the outskirts of the town, a brand new and exquisite facility, as they have anticipated.

As Kino carefully confirmed the prices,

“Cheapskate,” Hermes muttered from her side.

The room they booked in the building was spacious enough for one family to live in. Kino parked Hermes near the entrance and removed all of the luggage on top of him.

Then Kino proceeded right away to do what she cannot do outside countries...

“It’s bath time!”

“Yeah, yeah. Take your time.”

That is, bathing.

Kino filled the large bathtub with hot water, and indeed took her time soaking in it. Afterwards, she washed her underwear in the bathroom and hung them to dry.

After that Kino went to a restaurant for her dinner. She ate to her heart’s content and upon returning, instantly prepared herself for sleep.

“If you sleep right after eating, you’ll turn into a cow, Kino.”

“I want to try that at least once.”

“Even if you become a cow, you can’t eat yourself, you know.”

“I’ll take care.”

Kino answered Hermes as she lay on top of the spiffy white sheets with only her underwear on. Then she turned off the tiny lights in the room.

“Kino, what are we doing tomorrow? Other than the beautiful buildings, there really might be nothing to see in this country.”

Kino answered with a sleepy voice,

“Well, that may be true. If so... let’s just look for something that we can sell. We have the whole day for that then... Good night.”

“All right. Good night.”

—

The next day, Kino woke up at dawn.

The farming scenery that greeted from outside the windows was hazy with the morning mist.

As usual, Kino practiced quick draw with the hand persuader (note: a persuader is a gun, in this case a pistol) slung on her right thigh and returned it to its holster after a swift maintenance check.

After eating breakfast, she proceeded on literally beating Hermes awake.

As this was the sole hotel in the country, Kino left her travelling luggage in the room under lock and key. Then she took Hermes for a stroll around the country.

And after some time,

“I’m beat!”

“Uh-huh...”

By noon, Hermes and Kino had almost finished touring the place.

As they were left with nothing to do,

“What’s the plan, Kino? Shall we go back to the hotel? I hereby permit you to take a nap.”

“I need your ‘permit’? Anyway, since the weather’s warm and nice, maybe I should just take a nap out here.”

“It’s a nap either way.”

Kino pushed Hermes to an area made green by the forest and lawns.

As expected, it was a public park, a wide area with only a few people in sight. Only a number of parents letting their children run around could be seen.

Kino stopped Hermes under the shade of a tree by the edge of the lawn and seated herself. Using her coat in place of a carpet, she lay down facing the skies.

“Okay, snooze time.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“Wake me up if there’s any danger.”

“Got it.”

And so Kino closed her eyes, and fell asleep after three seconds.

—

A mere one hour later,

“—Mm?”

Kino opened her eyes. And the first thing she saw was,

“...”

Someone standing right next to her—a child—looking down at her.

The child looked to be around eleven years old. A short-haired girl, wearing a long-sleeved sweater and a skirt. She stared at Kino with pupils dilated.

Meanwhile, Kino,

“Uhm...”

Confused and clueless of the situation she was in, remained in her position, and turned her head around seemingly in search of something.

Sure enough, she found Hermes still parked nearby—“Oh, you’re awake.”—with these words to greet her.

While still looking up at the girl who was staring down at her,

“Who is this kid?” she asked Hermes.

“Lessee... around six minutes and thirty-four seconds ago, she came here and has since then been looking down at you.”

“Wha—, why didn’t you wake me up?”

“Because there’s no danger. I couldn’t confirm any weapons on her person, and her muscles don’t seem strong enough to kill you barehanded.”

“Well, I understand that, but...”

Kino slowly got up.

She addressed the girl who was still staring at her. “Hello there, little miss. I’m Kino,” and introduced herself.

Meanwhile the girl,

“ ... ”

Remained quiet, and without the slightest twitch on her face, stared at Kino.

“Er, hello. What’s your name?”

“ ... ”

“Can you speak?”

“ ... ”

“Well, this is something...”

“Oh, it looks like her parents are coming right now. Look behind you,” Hermes said when Kino has just about given up.

Kino looked over her shoulder and saw. From quite a distance, a young couple who seemed to be the parents of the girl were heading towards them frantically.

Kino stood up and brushed off the grass that clung to her coat. She approached Hermes and removed his stand.

“... Maybe we should wait a bit.”

She stopped,

“ ... ”

And together with the girl who looked up at her wordlessly, Kino waited.

The parents ran over and finally reached Kino, short of breath. They looked to be only around their twenties.

They were really young to be parents.

“So this is where you were...”

“Good grief...”

First, the parents regarded their daughter with shock, and then checked all over her body to confirm if she wasn’t hurt anywhere.

The young father and mother turned to Kino.

“Traveler... we’re afraid our daughter has been very rude to you,” the father

said politely. Just like the other residents of the country, his face betrayed no emotion, and his manner was tinged with indifference.

“Please don’t trouble yourself over me. I was just sleeping anyway.”

“Yeah! That girl tiptoed in and just stood there staring at Kino. Travelers must be really odd to behold,” Hermes added.

The parents returned short ‘I see’s and turned to leave with the girl. They pushed her tiny back to propel her forward.

And at that moment,

A gush of words flowed from the girl who had been quiet the whole time.

“This person is so amazing. I don’t get bored watching no matter how much time passed. My heart is pounding.”

At the same time, the girl smiled.

She looked at Kino,

“You know... to me... you are... special!”

And her smile was just like a flower in full bloom.

—

From then, several things happened in succession.

Right after the girl spoke out her mind, the couple immediately produced a handkerchief and a bottle from their bag.

The father moistened the handkerchief with the liquid inside the small bottle, a container tiny enough to fit in one’s pocket. Then the handkerchief was passed to the mother, who pushed it onto the child’s mouth.

The girl lost consciousness and plopped down on the lawn, asleep.

It was only a mere five seconds since the girl uttered the last word of her sentence.

The father carried the girl on her shoulder and ran away in a flurry. The mother was about to follow them, but stopped in her tracks and turned around

to Kino and Hermes.

“Please don’t make a fuss. Tomorrow, a person in charge will go to your hotel to explain.”

And left only these words.

— —

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino and Hermes were waiting by the hotel lobby when,

“Good morning. Thank you for waiting.”

A man came to them and said this softly.

He looked to be around forty. He wore a business suit and tie, a rather orderly appearance among the simply-garbed populace of this country. He carried with him a wooden box.

A hotel employee brought out tea for two, and left just as silently as he had come.

“I believe you found yesterday’s events surprising. I am grateful that you gave us a chance to explain.”

The man, with an unreadable expression on his face, began his explanation with these words.

Kino spoke, “It’s a pleasure, it saved us a great deal of trouble by coming here yourself to enlighten us. As we are outsiders, we really don’t have any say even if you make us leave the country without telling us anything.”

“That’s right. This country must have its own issues after all,” Hermes added, and the man, still as inexpressive as before, mildly refuted,

“And we, for that matter, can’t do anything even if you began to spread rumors that we are a barbaric country that sedates and abducts children. That is, if we do not clarify matters.”

“I see.”

Kino and Hermes answered at the same time.

“Now then,” the man began. “The actions the couple took yesterday must have been very baffling to you, Kino and Hermes. However, in this country, what they did was truly appropriate. That’s because...”

The man paused for a moment. And then,

“In our country, love is prohibited by law.”

—

“Love is... prohibited?”

“That’s right.”

“Why? And, how?”

“Of course. I’ll explain things as we go along.”

He answered Kino and Hermes’ questions without hesitation, and continued with his explanation.

“In our country, all acts of love are prohibited. Simply put, it is not allowed ‘to like or be fond of another person’. Now, is there any need for me to explain why people harbour this feeling called ‘love’ for another?”

“Um...”

While Kino pondered, Hermes flat out declared,

“That’s simple. Because humans are living things, they need to produce offspring. Males and females can’t be together if there’s no attraction between them.”

“Exactly. That’s very perceptive of you, Hermes.”

“Yay, I was praised!”

“Then... that makes it harder to understand why love would be outlawed.”

As Kino expressed her honest thoughts, Hermes once again remarked,

“Yeah. It’s really weird. —If that’s the case, how on earth could this country’s people have descendants?”

The man answered with a small nod.

“We’ll get to that later. —But first, let me tell you the reason why love is prohibited in our country.”

—

The man spoke in with utter composure.

“To begin with, love is a ‘condition that makes one deviate immensely from a composed state of mind.’ In order to leave behind offspring, animals are forced to work towards getting a partner of the opposite sex. It is a so-called instinct. But frankly speaking, it’s just barbarity.”

“Okay...”

“Uh-huh! And then?”

“About a hundred years ago, a certain scholar discovered a theory governing love. It was an event that catalysed an extensive reform in our country’s ways. That theory is called the ‘Four-Year Love Principle’.”

“Huh?” Kino who did not understand the man’s explanation, tilted her head.

“Four-year what?” Hermes asked, just as confused.

“To put it simply, the ‘Four-Year Love Principle’ states that love between human beings lasts for a mere four years. —Most animals, not just humans, reproduce through male-female interaction. And after copulation, animals protect their young until such time when they are ready to be separated from their parents. Am I making sense so far?”

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

“We can say that the interval of time wherein a male and female stay as a ‘couple’ in order to protect their offspring is an important phase. It is an instinct for animals; a behavior that is carved deep someplace in their being. And so, the ‘Four-Year Love Principle’ tells us an aspect of this instinct that, too, exists in humans. To be exact—”

To make his point clear, the man raised his fingers, counting as he explained.

“The encounter between a man and a woman, intercourse, and childbirth takes about one year. Then, rapid brain development is completed in about three years. That’s a total of four years—four years for human beings to efficiently leave behind excellent progeny. This period is that indispensable ‘couple’ phase for humans.”

“Ah, so this ‘four-year love principle’ is just saying that humans fall in love for four years in order to keep a man and a woman together during that period, right?” Kino said.

The man gave her a firm nod.

“Precisely. During this phase, an abnormal mental state kicks in that makes a couple desire each other so much that they consider even their partner’s shortcomings as virtues. It is from this behavior that sayings like ‘love is blind’ or ‘love makes pockmarks appear to be dimples’ originated. A simpler explanation would be, ‘love makes one go crazy’.”

“That’s a terrible way to put it,” Hermes mumbled. The man continued,

“And after four years, they return from their madness and regain their true selves. Sure enough, statistics show that majority of couples divorce after four years. The scholar advocated that there is a certain meaning to the fact that love between humans lasts no longer than four years. And that is gene diversity. Are you aware of the concept of ‘genetics’?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Kino answered.

“Gene diversity is higher between siblings from different fathers or mothers than between siblings born from the same parents. It only means that switching to different partners after a child reaches three years of age in order to produce another child with a different set of genes is the *appropriate* strategy for the survival of a species,” Hermes elaborated.

The man nodded.

“Yes. For thousands of years, human beings have lived—no, survived—by leaving offspring with diverse genes each time they are taken captive by this abnormal mental state called ‘love’ every four years.”

“I see.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Good. But in these modern times, there is no need to carry on with this practice anymore. I don’t know about other countries, but here, you can only have a child with the person you have married. Changing partners every four years is now pointless. Due to the advancement in the field of medicine, it is no longer necessary to pursue genetic diversity.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

“Divorcing every four years sure sounds troublesome.”

“Indeed. So if that’s the case, what should be done? How can we triumph over our instincts? After wracking our brains for the answer, the basic solution we came up with is, to outlaw love.”

“In short... to forcibly prohibit mutual attraction between men and women?” Kino asked.

“That’s right,” the man readily affirmed. And then,

“With this, all problems are solved. That barbaric way of humans losing their self-control to produce and raise children only to come back to their senses after four years, can become a mere remnant of the past.”

“That sounds great!” Hermes said, sounding pleasantly surprised.

“Okay..., but how?”

“The easiest way to put it would be, by giving them medicine,” the man answered. “I’ll make the explanation simpler. When a person is in love, the body produces a variety of chemicals in the brain. These are very potent substances. It wouldn’t be inaccurate to call them ‘drugs’. These chemicals distort a person’s judgment, making them desire a partner no matter what. And if one can’t attain this goal, all the more will the desire increase, creating a frightful mental state. The reason for the existence of those that chase around people, kill, or kill themselves because they cannot find love, are these chemicals.”

“So... you mean you stop the effects of these ‘brain drugs’? How...?”

“Poison to fight poison?”

The man nodded to Hermes’ words.

“Yes. Chemicals can deal with other chemicals. It took us thirty years to develop a medicine that can thoroughly counteract these drugs in the brain. By administering the medicine regularly, people can constantly preserve their stable mental state.”

“And you make everyone take this medicine?”

“Of course. And hence, just by taking this ‘poison’ like any other medicine, there’s not a single worry that the law will be violated. And not one ever went against this law. For several decades, there wasn’t a single person who was found guilty of violating it.”

“Aha! Now I get it!” Hermes’ exclaimed. “That girl yesterday was about to break the law! She was falling in love for the first time! She’s in her puppy love stage!”

“Oh,” Kino muttered inadvertently.

“That is indeed the case. I wouldn’t expect any less of you, Hermes. Truly impressive,” the man praised, his face still revealing no expression. And then,

“Most of our citizens know nothing about ‘love’. That’s because the medicine is usually administered as early as ten years of age. But in extremely rare cases, there are people who can overcome the medicine’s effect. The brain drugs are a little too active when one is young. This is a phenomenon that is more likely to occur during the so-called ‘first love’. It is certain that the girl yesterday has experienced this phenomenon.”

“To her, Kino must have seemed to be a knight in shining armor... erm, at least for four years. But is it really okay not to explain things from our side? Kino, she has mistaken you for a guy, you know?”

Kino only shrugged her shoulders quietly.

Finding no particular importance to this matter, the man only continued his explanation.

“It seems like the child only stared at Kino and kept quiet the entire time.

During that interval, two chemicals must be fighting each other inside her head. And the evil chemical must have won that battle. Sedating the child was the most appropriate way of dealing with the situation. As long as one is prepared there is no need to worry.”

“So parents with children of marriageable age are supposed to carry something like that all the time, eh? That must be some work,” Hermes commented in amusement.

“Then—” Kino tilted her head. “We now know why and how love is prohibited here. And yet, there are still couples and children in this country. How did everyone manage to find their partners and get married?”

Before the man could answer, “Drawing lots?” Hermes quickly butted in. “Or, does the country decide for them?”

The man responded to Hermes, “That’s right. You sure know a lot.”

“Eh? I’m correct? Which one? Drawing lots?”

“No, it’s the latter. That is, the government decides who are going to get married to each other.”

Still silent, Kino waited for the man’s next words.

“Here, the government investigates all of its citizens, and makes everyone undergo counselling. Each person’s preferences, personality, and so on are completely examined. Using this information, we select the one who is suitable to stay with a person for his or her entire life. Men and women can get married as early as the age of sixteen. At that time, they are introduced to their future spouse.”

Hermes asked, “Aren’t there any problems arising from that? Well, not like there seems to be any.”

“It’s all right. That’s because we thoroughly investigate from the moment they are born,” the man readily answered.

“Er, that’s not what I mean. I was thinking more along the lines of complaints or objections?”

“There are none. The government finds the perfect partner for each person.

The citizens never complained. The amount of information a single individual has about another cannot be compared to that of the government's. Also, unlike a mind destroyed by those brain chemicals, the government is able to make the choice calmly and rationally. And so a man and a woman, who in turn will be husband and wife, and eventually, parents, can do their responsibilities without fail. There's no such thing as an 'unhappy marriage' in this country. We do not force people who wish to stay single to marry, of course, but the possibility of that happening is less than one percent."

"Well, the medicine must be stopping them from saying things like 'I want to marry someone gorgeous!' but what about other factors?"

"Factors, like?"

"Uhm, for instance, what if someone says 'I want to marry someone rich!'"

"That is not possible. Our country frowns upon competition. Each one works and earns wages like everybody else. People who refuse to work are sent to prison for neglecting their obligation to render labor. We provide support only in cases when certain circumstances—health-related or otherwise—hinders a person to work. The costs of raising the children are also mostly shouldered by the government."

"Oh."

Having run out of questions to ask, Hermes kept quiet.

"I see. I understand it very well," Kino said. And continued, "It's just that I don't think other people outside this country know about this yet. Is it really all right to tell outsiders about this? What if we spread it around?" she asked, making sure.

"Of course. You can even say that our country wishes for that to happen."

As he answered, the man showed them a box. He placed it on top of the table, and opened its lid.

The sturdy-looking wooden box about the size of a book contained three tiny bottles filled with capsules, and a booklet.

"We would like you to accept this, Kino. This is a present from our country,"

the man said.

Before the man could tell them about the contents,

“You don’t say...”

Kino, as well as Hermes, had already guessed.

“Ah! This must be the medicine that can suppress love! And that booklet must be the instructions on how to make it!”

The man nodded in assent, as he had done several times before.

“Correct. With a certain level of knowledge in pharmaceuticals, this medicine is not at all difficult to produce. We then leave to you, Kino, to take this medicine and its formula to other countries and use it as you see fit. Give it away it for free or sell it for a fortune, it is your choice. You can even use it yourself if you like.”

The man closed the box and gently pushed it towards Kino.

“...”

Kino accepted the gift, an object which is both small and light.

“Great! Now that’s something we can take with us!”

Hermes gleefully noted.

—

Around noon, Kino and Hermes were in front of the gates where they have entered.

This time, they stood before the navel-like tunnel that will lead them outside the country.

“Traveler!”

A number of people were approaching them. It was the father, the mother and the daughter they met the previous day. Three men wearing business suits followed right behind them, to escort or perhaps to observe their actions.

Kino pushed down Hermes’ side stand, and removed her hat and goggles.

“Yes?”

Kino looked at the girl.

The girl spoke, but with a blank expression just like the day before.

“Traveler, I’m really sorry for the trouble I have caused. I thought it was embarrassing of me to say such weird things. I no longer feel anything like that anymore, so please don’t worry about it.”

Kino answered, “Thank you, you went all the way to tell me about it too. Don’t worry, it doesn’t bother me anymore.

—

While traversing the same road they used to reach the country,

“That was a pretty interesting country,” Hermes remarked happily while Kino drove him.

“Hey Kino, in the end all you bought was some fuel and portable rations. So what will you do? Will you sell that box in your bag to someone?”

And Kino answered the question.

第九話
「料理の国」
— Original —



Chapter 9: "Land of Cooking" —Original—

(1/5)

This is a story that happened in a certain country.

“Everyone! Have you heard about the ‘wandering chef’?”

In one room of a certain hotel, a man said excitedly.

And hearing him, a number of men and women in the same room brightened up and spoke up one after the other.

“Oh I know! They say it was a traveler who can turn any ingredient into something delicious!”

“And according to rumors, this traveler hides his identity to avoid directing attention to himself!”

“Yeah! He would prepare meals in secret, and when the final product was to his satisfaction and if he feels up to it, he would leave behind the recipe once he departs from a country!”

“I heard the same thing. It must be true since a lot of merchants have said so.”

And so, this was how the subject of the ‘wandering chef’ gained a huge upsurge in the room.

And then,

“But, why talk about the wandering chef now?" Someone asked.

The man who gained the attention of everybody in the room by talking about the wandering chef cried out without concealing his seething emotions.

“Listen up! This news is sure to blow you away! A merchant who entered the country a while ago said that the wandering chef has stopped by a country not far from here! And because there’s only one road around these parts, he will definitely come to our country!”

Their eyes widened up, and they exclaimed one after the other.

“Eh! When?”

“Is that for real? When?”

“No way! When?”

“W-when is he coming?”

The man answered with a shake of his head.

“I don’t know that much! It could be tomorrow or next month! But if he comes, you'd want to try some of his cooking, won't you?”

“Why of course! But it depends on his mood, right? I heard there are times when he would totally refuse to cook, you know?”

“That’s why we’re going to pester him until he does! It’s not like our reputation is on the line! I’m sure he’d budge with a little bit of persuasion! Of course, the chef will pretend to be someone else to avoid attention!” The man said, and everyone agreed.

“We could say something like ‘the students are studying culinary arts at school, and would like to try a traveler’s cooking’!”

“That’s it! Let’s go with that plan! Let’s also gather the best ingredients from our country!”

“Then chicken would be the best! After all, in this country it’s against the law to raise chickens without letting them run free! In the olden days, our chickens have been admired for being tender and flavorful!”

“Good idea! We’ll make him cook an unbelievably delicious chicken dish, and then, we'll make it into our specialty!”

“For sure, we’ll be getting lots of visitors!”

Outside the room where all this excited talk were taking place, that is, along the corridor, was a signboard.

It says, *‘Restaurant Owners’ Regular Assembly’*.

“But it won’t do if we don’t know who this wandering chef is!”

“Indeed! We don’t know anything else other than the fact that he is a traveler...”

“Don’t we have a description, at least? If we know that much, we can ask the immigration officers to secretly inform us as soon as he enters the country! Of course, we have to bribe them a bit.”

“Well, that’s that. But I obtained some credible information!”

“What sort?” “What sort?” “What sort?” “What sort?”

“That wandering chef is—”

“Is?” “Is?” “Is?” “Is?”

“Fond of brown coats!”

— —

On a certain evening.

“I would just like to ask one more time... Does this brown coat really belong to you? And you wear it during the winter?”

Outside the gates, a traveler was asked such a question.

The one asking it was a young female immigration officer.

And the one being asked was a young traveler in a brown coat, who goes by the name Kino.

“That’s right. I’ve always had it.”

Kino answered, and the motorrad (Note: a motorcycle, only to note that it cannot fly) with her added,

“It’s like Kino’s trademark, or something! There’s no way Kino would part with it!”

Upon hearing this, the immigration officer chuckled—an eerie one at that. And then,

“I know right! Isn’t brown wonderful? Now here’s your permit. Come in, come in! Please proceed through this pathway. Just push Hermes along with you!”

She stamped on the permit papers delightfully and handed them to Kino.

Kino lightly bowed as she accepted the papers, which she neatly folded and stowed into her black jacket's pocket.

Then she pushed Hermes along the tunnel that penetrates into the thick walls.

After a while, Hermes asked in a voice only loud enough for Kino to hear.

"I wonder what's up, Kino? That immigration officer lady was tense for some reason. I wonder if she liked your coat? Or maybe it's really about brown?"

Kino shook her head.

"I have no idea at all. By the way Hermes, what do you mean by 'brown'?"

(2/5)

The day after they entered, Kino spent the entire morning going around the country.

As it was not too big of a country, they finished touring it in just one day.

And when evening came, as they were riding on the narrow roads to return to their hotel,

"Greetings, traveler!"

"Whoa!" "Aah!"

A young woman leapt right in front of Kino and Hermes.

Kino quickly hit the brakes. She was somehow able to stop in front of the woman, and cut Hermes' engine.

"H-hello... That was dangerous, you know?"

"That's right! If we ran over you, it would *really* hurt!"

Kino and Hermes said with a tinge of displeasure. The woman stuck her tongue out.

"Tee-hee! Sorry about that!"

And apologized with no hint of remorse. Then she went straight to the point.

“Traveler, please cook for us!”

“H-huh?” “Eh?”

As the woman’s words were beyond their expectations, Kino and Hermes were only able to stammer out clumsily. In addition, Hermes exclaimed,

“Eeeeeeeeh?”

And the woman, as if refusing to lose against Hermes, said in a voice just as loud,

“I’m attending a culinary school! I am interested in dishes made by travelers! We have chicken—the product this country is famous for! We also have vegetables! Please!”

“Wait, even if you say please...,” Kino said in confusion.

“You want to taste... Kino’s cooking?” Hermes asked in an extremely worried tone.

“Yes!”

Kino looked at the wide grin on the woman’s face, contemplated for a while, then asked,

“If I cook for you, will you let me eat some?”

“Eh? Kino? W-wait a minute! Kino!”

“Why, of course! Please add flavor to our country’s delicious chicken, traveler!”

“In that case, I have no reason to refuse. That is, if I can leave all the preparation to you.”

“Yay! Then how about tomorrow just before noon? We’ll send someone to pick you up from the hotel, okay?”

“Other than departure, I have no other plans for tomorrow, so I guess it’s okay.”

“All right! Then tomorrow it is! I’m looking forward to it!”

Then the woman happily skipped away, leaving Kino and Hermes alone in the

middle of the road.

“How strange. Well, it’s fine as long as I get to eat for free,” Kino said.

“Will you really do it? I mean, it’s fine if you’re the only one who eats that stuff you make... but will you let the people here eat your cooking?” From below, Hermes asked with evident terror.

“Well, those are the conditions.”

“T-they don't know, do they...?”

“Know what?”

Kino tilted her head, and Hermes cried out.

“But Kino! Even that person who fears nothing, *that* Master, avoids your cooking like the plague! It’s the most extremely, absolutely, decisively indescribable thing that ever existed! The poor citizens of this country might *die!* Nine times over!”

“Ahaha, surely it’s not that bad. This time, I’ll make it sensibly,” Kino said as she started Hermes’ engine.

“Hey Kino, it’s not yet too late! Can we leave now?” Hermes said almost pleadingly.

“It’s not yet three days, you know?” Kino answered readily.

And as they launched off, Hermes mumbled.

“Everyone, run.”

—

The next day.

Despite all of Hermes’ worries, they were picked up at the hotel.

There were about twenty adults other than the woman they met the previous day. All of them threw words of gratitude to Kino one after the other.

“Er, right... Thank you...”

Kino was surprised as there was much more people than she had anticipated.

“Please let us observe as well!”

“That’s fine with me... but in exchange, I can’t tell you how I’m doing things, okay...?” Kino said, but only because it was not good enough of a dish to be taught to so many people. However, everyone there took it to mean that she was concealing her secret technique.

“We don’t mind at all! Now, please come this way!”

Kino and Hermes were guided to a fine restaurant. It was reserved.

And on the backyard, there were plenty of chicken running free. They were running and leaping energetically, and some could even fly for a rather long distance.

“Those chicken look delicious,” Kino said with sparkling eyes.

“It’s too late.”

Hermes stayed silent after that, as if he had foreseen everything.

(3/5)

Free-range chicken, vegetables, and every possible seasoning there is.

The best ingredients were prepared all for the sake of Kino’s cooking.

“Is it really all right for me to make whatever I want?”

“Of course! We won’t say anything while you’re at it!”

And so, Kino wore the apron and rolled up the sleeves of her shirt.

The chicken that Kino made them catch for her was hanging upside down with its feet tied together. It has become docile after a while.

And with the knife that she always used, Kino slit the chicken's neck.

When all the blood has been drained from the chicken, she plunged it in boiling water and plucked its feathers. And after warming the down feathers left on its skin, she cut open its stomach and removed its entrails. Now it has become chicken meat that can be sold in a butcher’s shop.

The onlookers observed as the chicken was chopped up into pieces by Kino,

who has lost the option to just barbecue the chicken whole.

“Hmm, the traveler’s quite skilled, I see.”

“Just as we expected!”

“Brilliant!”

They watched her with admiration.

After chopping the chicken, Kino contemplated for a while in front of all the vegetables and seasonings prepared before her. All of these the audience watched without any undue interference.

“Hey, motorrad.”

One person talked to the seemingly bored motorrad. Hermes spoke after being silent for some time.

“What is it?”

“Your partner sure knows how to handle knives.”

“Of course. Back in Master’s place, Kino was carefully trained in the art of using knives.”

Hermes stopped before he could add, ‘for fighting’.

“I can’t wait to find out what kind of stuff the traveler’s making!”

“Um, let me just confirm one more time... Will all of you really eat Kino’s cooking?”

“Why of course! If we don’t taste it, we couldn’t possibly steal—, I mean, remember its flavor!”

“Hmm... Well, good luck.”

And despite all of Hermes’ worries, Kino seemed to have finally decided on what to make.

Kino dexterously chopped onions into thin slices. Then she cut the chicken into bite-sized pieces and used plenty of cooking oil to fry it to a crisp.

Without paying heed to the glares of the audience who were trying to steal her effortless techniques, Kino continued to busy her hands.

Kino stir-fried the onions in a saucepan, and fortunately, was able to do so without burning them. Finally, she placed the pieces of chicken into the pan and began to add seasonings for the finishing touch.

At this point, the audience has gathered around the gas stove. Hermes was left alone at the back.

“These people must be daredevils...”

Muttering words that no one would hear.

“Kino’s cooking is terrible, you know? Of course she did not eat it, but when Kino told her the stuff she put in the pot, that Master looked as if she would die at the prospect of eating Kino’s cooking!”

At that point, Kino was pouring lots of vinegar into the pot. She did not even measure it. She was pouring it straight from the bottle. Furthermore, she tossed, not a spoon, not a pinch, but a bowlful of chili into the mixture. She simply tossed everything that was in the bowl.

Meanwhile, Hermes went on mumbling.

“And even though at first Master said they were to share all housework, after that she said it’s perfectly fine to leave all the cooking to her. It was *that* terrible. See, Kino puts in too many seasonings. And to think she’s always very careful in measuring the propellant she puts in her persuader!”

The contents of the pan absorbed the red hue of the chili. Then Kino threw in some more pepper, prickly ash, and horseradish into the mix for good measure.

There was no hesitation in her actions, as if everything she was doing were things she has decided on from the start. Her expression was brimming with self-confidence.

“I’m sure she hasn’t really decided on anything.”

Of course no one heard what Hermes said.

Kino then sampled a piece of the chicken, and chewed it carefully.

“Okay.”

She nodded with satisfaction. She turned off the flames of the stove.

“It’s done.”

“Oh!” “It’s finished!” “Finally!”

“Traveler, what is the name of this dish?”

“Huh? A name? It doesn’t have one. I only invented it today.”

“I see! So it was on instinct!”

“Eh? Well yeah, I guess.”

“As expected!” “That was a daring choice of seasonings!” “And with no hesitation at all!”

“You seemed to have used quite a lot of those chili... So much it turned the chicken red.”

“Yeah, I just felt like I had to use them all.”

“Oh! Naturally!”

“Those are words no novice would use!”

“This traveler is truly a genius chef...”

“Shall we eat it together?”

“Those words are a joy to hear! But the honor of eating it first goes to its creator! Please, have a fill of our country’s chicken!”

“Then if you’ll excuse me... I’ll go ahead.”

She put a large serving in her plate, and started to eat. Kino ate with gusto.

“Oh, he’s gobbling it up!” “He sure seems to relish every bite...” “It looks like it, but maybe it’s not that spicy after all.” “Damn, I’m getting hungry.”

“Hm, I believe it’s quite delicious.—Everyone, please have a taste.”

(4/5)

Kino, who cooked, ate, and stuffed herself full, and Hermes, who only looked on from beginning to end, finally departed the country that afternoon.

While running leisurely along the road inside a forest bright with the colors of

autumn, Hermes spoke up.

“Kino, now that we’re out of the country, and so far that we couldn’t even see the walls, I’ll be completely honest with you. The faces of those people while they ate your cooking looked really horrible.”

Hermes was watching as the faces of the people who ate Kino’s dish transformed into an expression that has no word to describe it.

“Yup,” Kino nodded, then quickly added, “Seems like it. Maybe it was a little bit too spicy?”

“A little bit? The chicken looked like tomatoes, you know?”

“I thought that much spice was just about right. And when I tasted it, it doesn’t seem like it can’t be eaten. The prickly ash was also effective, it made the dish more fun to eat,” Kino said honestly, with no jest or sarcasm in her tone.

Hermes, the one who did not have to eat Kino’s cooking by virtue of being a motorrad, asked some more.

“Then what about the chicken? They seem to be particularly proud of it, you know?”

“Oh, it was really chewy.”

“That’s it? What about the savory flavor of the oozing fat, or its freshness, and all that jazz?”

“Fine, I guess. But isn’t it great that they all ate it enthusiastically? I thought I’d make some extra so I can take some with me for dinner, but they ended up eating all of it.”

Hermes finally gave up on getting across his meaning to Kino, and changed the subject.

“I can never understand it, Kino. If it was too spicy to eat, they can just say ‘Hot!’ and refuse to eat it. But all of them ate frantically, as if they were in some competition. They were sweating while they ate!”

“Maybe it’s delicious no matter who eats it? That must be it. From time to time, even I—”

“Nope, that’s definitely not it. How should I put it... Maybe you’re just the type who would still do it despite knowing that you have disastrous talents in cooking, Kino.”

“That’s because the chicken looked so delicious.”

“Though the finished product sure didn't look like it.”

“At any rate, it was a fun country.”

Kino’s face broke into a wide smile.

“At any rate, it was a weird country.”

Hermes mumbled.

—

The day after Kino and Hermes’ departure, a ‘Restaurant Owners’ Special Meeting’ was held in the country. Everyone who ate Kino’s cooking surrounded a table.

“E-everyone... I heard that the traveler has already left... What do you honestly think about the dish...?”

“Terrifying.” “Outrageous.” “Demonic.” “Frightful.” “Out of this world.”

Everyone expressed their impressions one after the other. They uttered adjectives that normally don’t describe food.

“You bet... There’s just one thing I could say about it. It’s a flavor that hasn’t been tried in this country!”

“No doubt.” “Exactly.” “Uh-huh.” “That’s right.”

“It was very original, wasn’t it? Moreover, the ingredients were thrown in without measurement. They say geniuses are of that sort.”

The man talked heartily with his eyes on the ceiling.

Then he slapped the table as he stood up, and clenched his fists.

“If we fail to comprehend the style of a genius chef, people will say that we have unrefined tastebuds! That flavor should be reproduced and made into a

tradition at all costs! We have to hand it down to the next generations! It will be no simple task, but we should do our best!”

“Yeah!” “Okay!” “Let’s do it!” “Yes!”

—

Days have passed since then.

The seasons have changed. Soon it was summer.

It was on a certain warm day, with gigantic columns of clouds soaring in the sky, and with cicadas raising a clamor in the forests.

“Please let me in...”

A lone traveler knocked at the gates of this country.

The same lady immigration officer who welcomed Kino dealt with the traveler.

“Welcome, traveler! It was quite hot this year, eh?”

The traveler, a man in his thirties, arrived in the country by walking. He wore shorts and a T-shirt.

“Yes... It was really hot, so I disposed a lot of my clothes in the previous country. I’m also quite hungry.”

“Then please try our famous dish we call ‘Chicken Kinoyaki’!”

The man’s eyes glinted sharply upon hearing the immigration officer’s words.

“Oh, there’s such a thing? I’ll look forward to it.”

And so...

“One order of Chicken Kinoyaki!”

A deep-red chicken was right in front of the man. As soon as he entered, he rushed into the nearest restaurant and ordered the famous dish.

“...”

He gaped at the dish that was presented to him.

He looked at the reddish pile that was sitting on his plate.

(5/5)

After staring at the dish for a while,

“Wow... this dish is so... red!”

The man expressed his honest impressions. He looked as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, and blinked his eyes several times.

“So intense, don't you think?” The one who brought the dish, the restaurant owner himself, said in delight. The man asked,

“I heard that this country's specialty is chicken... but if I'm not mistaken, this red thing is chili, isn't it?”

“Indeed! The recipe calls for as much chili as there is chicken! Then add a whole cup of vinegar, and liberal amounts of prickly ash! It's a bit different from the delicate flavor of those sold in shops, but we still followed the recipe!”

“Well... this is quite...”

“They say it's hard on your first time, so we have prepared plenty of water for you!”

“Thank you very much. Um, thanks for the food...”

And so, the real 'wandering chef' ate this dish.

—

That evening, the traveler arrived in his hotel with a pale face.

It was still quite hot but he was breaking into cold sweat.

The middle-aged man who owned the hotel found him.

“Welcome back. Your room has been prepared. Oh, you don't seem well...?”

The man answered with a lie.

“I-it seems I tired myself out during the journey... It's probably just fatigue...”

“That's not good. Please, eat lots of our delicious food to regain your

strength,” the owner offered cordially.

“You mean this country’s famous dish...?” the man asked.

“Of course, it’s Chicken Kinoyaki!”

“Y-yes... of course...”

“You can also order it in this hotel. Since you’re tired, shall we bring it to your room?”

“Eh? Um... well...”

It seems that the man was about to refuse, but his tense expression suddenly changed.

“Please do! —Also, will you lend me some cooking utensils? And please tell me where I can get some ingredients!”

He cried out with all his might.

—

It has been several days since this traveler departed.

A ‘Restaurant Owners’ Special Meeting’ was held in the country.

“You must know why we gathered everyone in this emergency meeting today. As we all know, the dish that the ‘wandering chef’ Kino made, the dish now popularly known as ‘Chicken Kinoyaki’, has pervaded the masses.”

“Uh-huh.” “Indeed.” “Yeah.” “That’s right.”

“However, another traveler made modifications to the recipe, and left it before he departed!”

Right in front of this man and the other owners was a plate.

Inside it were two kinds of dish. The first one was ‘Chicken Kinoyaki’, while the other was,

“That’s the reproduction of the recipe.”

“Hmm.” “I see.” “Is that so?” “Oh.”

It was a rather red chicken dish, though not as much as Chicken Kinoyaki.

“I wish to read the letter that he has left behind.”

The man opened the letter and read out loud.

‘To the people of this country,

I apologize for this personal matter.

I thought I have become very skillful in cooking. As a result, I have become conceited. But upon coming to your country, I realized that I have not yet fully mastered all kinds of flavor. From here on, I shall study and train even harder.

Knowing that it is very rude of me, I added my own flavor to your beloved dish, ‘Chicken Kinoyaki’.

It is not my intention to make a mockery of your beloved ‘Chicken Kinoyaki’.

It is only my joy to let you know that this combination is also plausible.

Sincerely yours.’

The man who read it wore a bitter expression as he said, “By all rights, a dish prepared by some nobody should just be ignored, but if people who tried it thought, ‘This isn’t so bad!’ and start serving the recipe in their restaurants, things will get complicated.”

“True.” “That’s right.” “Worrisome.” “Indeed.”

“We don’t need imitations of our famous dish! If we allow it, then the distinction will soon disappear! I was terribly upset when I first heard the news. But when I tried it— it really wasn’t bad at all. However, it’s no match to the impact of Chicken Kinoyaki. It’s probably because of the fruit and vegetable paste that mixed in with the chicken that suppresses its spiciness. This is probably easier to eat for children and the elderly.”

“I see.” “Yeah.” “That’s true.” “I agree.”

“And so— I have a suggestion!”

—

This country has two famous dishes.

‘Chicken Kinoyaki Original’ and ‘Chicken Kinoyaki Mild’.

No one knows the real story behind it. And no one will ever know.

But to this day, this country’s people still ate it heartily.

And they recommend it to all travelers who visit their country. This dish that bears the name of a certain traveler.





第十話
「広告の国」
— CounterMeasure —

Chapter 10: “Land of Advertisements” — CounterMeasure—

(1/2)

To all readers of this newspaper,

Good day! I’m Kino, a traveler!

I have a partner called Hermes, a motorrad (note: A two-wheeled vehicle, only denotes that it cannot fly)! He can be quite flippant at times, but he’s a great guy, and he rarely breaks down!

When I arrived in this country, the thing that surprised me most is that everyone here uses a communicating device called a “cell phone”.

It must be a delight to be able to reach your friends, family, and loved ones anytime, anywhere, especially in a huge country such as this!

During my long travels, I too wonder from time to time how nice it would be if I could contact the family that I have left behind in my country of birth.

‘I sure am lonely,’ I thought.

But at that moment,

“You have me, Kino!”

I was consoled by these words from Hermes!

—

During my entire stay in this country, I was using a cell phone that I have borrowed.

It was quite convenient!

I realized that it wasn’t just a mere phone, but a device that allows you to search for information with ease!

There’s even a map on its screen that showed me the route I should take!

I saw how every citizen from the very young to the elderly could use this device so expertly, and thought,

“What an amazing country! My life probably would have been so much different if I were born here!”

When I told Hermes that, he only had this to say:

“Welcome to science!”

—

By the way, the one I borrowed was a model from the *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* brand. It was very easy to use!

Initially, I was worried that I won't be able to master such a complicated device.

But the shopkeeper who lent it to me told me,

“*Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* phones are the easiest to use!”

So I decided to try it.

And it was true!

When I powered it on, it was set-up in beginner mode.

Whenever you have something you need help for, you can click on the [?] button, and this message appears:

[Please choose the feature you wish to use.]

And with a tap on the screen, it shows you simple instructions on how to accomplish the task at hand!

I was so surprised.

This was much simpler than driving Hermes! You see, it took me a quite a while before I was able to ride him!

Aww, don't sulk off Hermes. There, there.

—

The people of *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* must be very kind.

If all cell phones were this easy to use, everybody would be happy.

Eh? That's the company's mission and vision?

[Happiness in everybody's hands!]

-- Is that their motto?!

Wow, I didn't know that! But it's just as it says!

Benemaccio Dedelbaldend sure is amazing! This comes as a surprise even to a traveler!

—

Oh right, it also has a very nice design.

It just fits well in my hands... To put it in a way... it's effortless to carry it around, and it's not easy to drop!

Hermes told me it was 'ergonomic', which means not only the appearance, but also the ease of use was considered in its design. I totally get what he means!

When I looked at the catalogue, there was a range of other colors aside from the red one that I have been using! But they're all lively colors that can brighten up everyone!

That's *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* for you!

—

We will soon be leaving the country. But if we had more time, I would have loved to drop by *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* to tell them this:

"Thank you for creating such a magnificent cell phone!"

—

All of you citizens reading this paper right now are very fortunate to have such a wonderful company like *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* with you!

The next time we visit this country, I'm sure *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* will stand out even more!

And of course, I'll be using a *Benemaccio Dedelbaldend* phone again!

No! I might even buy one for myself!

There's no way I could forget about 'Benemaccio Dedelbaldend!

(Excerpt from an interview with Kino right before departure.)

—

“In short, this sort of article will be circulated all over the country's newspapers as advertisements.”

Said a man wearing a business suit and looked to be about thirty.

Kino and Hermes was reading from a page of the sample print.

“But I didn't say any of these things...”

“Same here! And we sound totally different too!”

(2/2)

The man who handed the sample print to Kino laughed,

“Ahahaha! It doesn't matter what you two have to say!”

They were in a park in front of the country's gates. It was almost evening, and nobody else was around.

“We at Zdoladondeba Dooledatta Advertising were asked the day before last to make a cell phone advertisement featuring you and Hermes. That's what I said, right?”

“Yes. You asked us the moment we entered the country.”

“Though it's more like we were forced to.”

“Well, I'm not going to deny that we might have been rather pushy, but Kino agreed to it in exchange for portable rations and fuel. Also, it was true that you used a Benemaccio Dedelbandend phone.”

“I did. But frankly, this gadget was hard to use. After all, I can get by just by listening to Hermes' instructions,” Kino said with all honesty.

“And the ones who made it aren't nice at all! The essential beginner mode

was really crudely done,” Hermes ruthlessly added.

“Well, that may be true,” the man admitted. “But you see, my job, that is, Zdoladondeba Dooledatta Advertising’s job, is to promote Benemaccio Dedelbandend phones, so obviously we can’t write those things. And by the way—”

The man took out his phone from his suit’s breast pocket.

“This one’s my personal favorite, a Poita Pappavicca phone. It’s very easy to use. I recommend it. Even if you pay me, I won’t use Benemaccio Dedelbandend. To be blunt, it’s the company with the worst reputation in this country when it comes to phones.” The man continued, “In short, if we are asked to advertise something, we have to do a good job of doing so. Advertising companies are made just for this purpose.”

“I see. So you use outsiders—” Hermes chimed in.

“That’s right! A traveler and a motorrad like you two! You wouldn’t be staying for too long, and it is unlikely that you will ever come back. Well, you might in the future, but not any time soon.”

“Well that’s true.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why it’s perfect for an advertisement! If people start to think, ‘It must be a good company if it’s praised by a foreigner, so that phone must be really good’, then the advertisement was a success.”

“But this company’s phones have a bad reputation right?” Hermes asked. The man readily nodded.

“True. But only around people who are knowledgeable in cell phones, those who subscribe in special magazines where people gathered information. Not everyone who wanted phones, like the children and the elderly, would be so informed. If those ignorant ones who only want phones see this advertisement, they would assume it’s good, don’t you think?”

“You have a point.”

“But when they use it and find out how bad it is—”

“The person who recommended it to them, in short me, has long left this country behind,” Kino continued the man’s words.

“Exactly. Even if people complained like, “I didn’t know this phone was so hard to use! I was fooled by that advertisement!” nobody would bother go after you far out there in the wild.”

“Right,” Hermes expressed his agreement in the fewest of words.

“Besides, a traveler like Kino might not be well-informed about cell phones from this country. It might be that you haven’t used any phone other than Benemaccio Dedelbandend, that’s why you think it’s wonderful. That’s also a feasible excuse in case anyone protests.”

“Dear me. Kino, you can learn a thing or two from this guy.”

Perhaps amused by the praise from Hermes, the man grinned,

“Well, this excellent advertising is pretty much the norm these days. Or perhaps, we have this country’s people to thank.”

—

Kino and Hermes parted ways with the man, proceeded with the exit procedures in the gates, and left. They were riding through a forest. And within this thick canopy where they couldn’t be seen from the walls,

“We’ve been waiting.”

Was a parked car, with several men waiting beside it. They seemed to be waiting for Kino and Hermes.

Kino greeted them, and removed something from Hermes’ frame. It resembled a motorrad accessory— a tiny audio and video recorder.

One of the men took it from Kino, and nodded satisfactorily.

“Thank you for your cooperation. With this we will be able to see what the country is like through Hermes’ ‘eyes’. We will use this information to make an advertisement for this country. After all, the actual experiences of a traveler are invaluable in strategies for increasing tourist count.”

“Um, officer,” Kino spoke.

The man Kino called ‘officer’ had an ID hanging over his chest. In it, his name and the words ‘Government Tourism Bureau’ were written.

“Yes, what is it?”

Kino continued.

“We probably weren’t of much use to you.”

第十一話
「鉄道之国」
— Missing Link —



Chapter 11: “A Land with a Railroad” — Missing Link—

(1/6)

“See, there are five countries here, situated along the edge of this enormous basin.”

“Hmm, it would be more convenient if they just merged into one country in the middle instead, no?”

Kino and Hermes chatted with each other as they rode through a path in the midst of a meadow.

It was spring.

Under the perfectly clear blue sky was vivid greenery as far as the eye could see.

The grass covering a good stretch of ground, as well the fresh leaves of tall trees here and there, glittered as they reflected off the morning sunlight.

A river flowed through the meadow. The narrow dirt path that Kino and Hermes rode through ran parallel with it continued on, at times keeping close and at times going astray. Ahead the path, over at the right side, the river would appear and disappear from their view time and again.

As they were in a wide valley, they could see mountains left and right. There were still traces of snow left on the mountaintops and along the ridges where the mountain streams flowed. The water from the thawing snow gushed in the river vigorously.

It was still quite cold to ride a motorrad (note: a two-wheeled vehicle, only to mean that it doesn't fly), so Kino wore her brown coat with its excess hem wrapped up to her thighs.

She had on a brimmed hat with flaps that covered her ears, and silver-framed goggles strapped around it.

“They do say that it was originally a single, enormous country, Hermes. But its people were divided into five groups. There were disagreements between them, and before long, each group decided to build their own countries as far away as possible from one another. That was about fifty years ago.”

“In other words, they broke up on site.”

“...I think you mean ‘broke up after a fight’.”

“Yes that’s it!”

Hermes said, then fell silent. After a while,

“So... are they still not in good terms with each other? Or have things settled down after so much time has passed?”

“I didn’t find out that much. All I know is that there are five countries here right now.”

“There are only two possibilities, Kino—they still don’t get along or their relations have improved.”

“No need emphasize something so obvious.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“Well, whatever. We’ll visit them one by one and observe. I’m curious as to how each one changed over time after they diverged.”

“Then Kino, if we see two walls at the same time, which one will we go to first?”

“Hmm? The closer one I guess?”

“Okay, then what if the distance is perfectly the same? What if at the end of this road, it branches off into two paths, and at the right there is a signboard that says so-and-so country is forty kilometers away, and at the left, this-and-that country is also forty kilometers away?”

“That would be troublesome. But when that happens, I’ll just leave it to luck.”

“Like tossing a coin?”

“That’s one way. Or, I can let go of your handle, and choose the direction where you fell...”

“That’s not how you use a motorrad, Kino!”

“Okay, let’s not go with that then. Anyway, for travelers like us, it doesn’t really pay to worry about the next destination. I’ll just go where I feel like when that happens.”

“That’s also part of life, huh?”

Kino and Hermes continued to traverse the road.

And before long, they found a signboard.

—

And the words written on the signboard were—

[The area right ahead is our country’s territory. Trespassing and vandalism beyond this point will be deemed as assault towards our country.]

“So it says, Kino.”

“Yup, that message can’t be any clearer.”

The signboard was shoved in the middle of the road, where it splits left and right into the north and south.

“Then what we are looking at right now is their territory?” Kino asked.

“I doubt it could mean anything else,” Hermes answered.

Before them, were railroad tracks.

There was the track bed with its layer of crushed stones, or what was known as the ballast, on top of which lay numerous crossties and four thick rails lined up parallel to each other. The rails were more than three meters apart.

The railroad was noticeably well-maintained.

The tracks appeared to be free of weeds and rust. The sunlight glistened on the rails that stretched far beyond the grassy meadow.

Kino got off Hermes and propped him on his stand. Then, careful not to tread over the track bed where the words ‘*THIS IS OUR TERRITORY*’ was written, she stood up before the signboard and looked left and right.

But she saw nothing but the wide tracks.

“That’s strange.”

Kino muttered under her breath. To this, Hermes responded with glee,

“Great! Kino, let’s ask them!”

“Ask who?”

“The ones about to come, who else?”

The plains fell quiet as soon as Hermes stopped talking. At that moment, Kino noticed.

It was the faint hum of vibrating metal.

The sound was coming from the rails in front of her.

The vibrations quickly grew louder, revealing the direction of its source. It was coming from the right—where Kino was looking—that is, from the north.

Kino focused her gaze towards the northern plains. Though she could not yet see what was coming, she had a fair idea what it was from the echoing clunks.

And it only took tens of seconds of waiting.

The sound became increasingly louder, and just when Kino could feel the tremors being transmitted to her legs, a gigantic train appeared in the middle of the meadow.

(2/6)

It was an incredibly enormous train.

Although the track itself was three meters across, the cars riding on top of it were more than twice as wide. And because it was also about as tall as it is wide, from up front it seemed like an approaching house.

The lead car was somewhat elliptically streamlined and installed with a thick armor plate inclined to the left for repelling piled-up snow and other obstacles in its way.

The train, painted a dark blue color, came running amidst the plains accompanied by the shaking and roaring of the ground. It approached Kino and Hermes, and rushed past them.

Each car was around thirty meters long.

It ran by, one car after another, some with chimneys, many with large windows. The silhouettes of the passengers aboard could also be seen.

Without Kino noticing, the train that she thought has passed them by started to slow down.

“This thing... it’s so big! And long!”

“Amazing!”

In an attempt not to lose to the roaring, Kino and Hermes conversed in exchanged yells.

Over forty cars have gone by right before their eyes. Eventually, the train came to a complete halt, accompanied by a dull clunk.

The motionless train seemed like a wall. It was as if a long, blue wall materialized on the spot that only moments ago had nothing but a railroad.

On top of its enormous wheels and chassis that looked like a factory’s skeletal framework, was its iron body painted in blue. At its flank were the windows, shuttered at the moment. Only its roof was painted white.

One part of the roof opened upwards with a thud.

And from within appeared the face of a man, who looked around thirty and wore a black suit. He smiled at Kino and Hermes, and called out to them cheerfully with a megaphone.

“Greetings traveler! I am the immigration officer! Do you want to enter our country?”

“Yes, please!” Kino answered with a shout so that the other person would hear.

“So the nearest country to us is this one, huh?” Hermes muttered.

—

The door at the side of the huge car opened slightly, and out came the suited immigration officer together with soldiers carrying persuaders (note: guns).

And so the immigration check on Kino and Hermes, which was customary in

any country, proceeded.

Of particular interest to them was as to whether or not Kino was carrying any powerful explosives with her.

Kino disclosed that she was only carrying the spare powder that she used for her persuaders, as well as fuel for Hermes. After agreeing that these items be temporarily put into their custody, Kino and Hermes was given permission to enter the country.

“Any questions before you come in?”

Kino took up the officer’s offer, and answered.

“I have too many questions I don’t know where to begin.”

“As to be expected. But as we can’t let the train stay stalled like this for too long, why don’t you come in, or shall we say, come aboard our country for the meantime?”

—

The side of the car now fully opened to the left and right, and a metallic slope slid out. Kino boarded Hermes and climbed up the slope, and finally entered the car.

The slope was straightened up, and the door was shut. Within the carriage rang a buzzer, which was then shortly followed by a humming sound, and soon the train was running vigorously on its way.

The interior of the car was lit up by the light coming in through the skylights in the ceiling. The carriage they were currently in seemed like a warehouse, with a large quantity of wooden boxes lined up and fixed with ropes.

The train continued to gain speed. The shaking was incredibly faint, and doesn’t match at all with the speed at which they were going, as they could see well from the flow of the sceneries outside the tiny windows.

“Kino, Hermes! Welcome to our country! Now let’s get down to business!”

The immigration officer spoke merrily. His face seemed like he would love to, and couldn’t wait to begin his story.

“First of all, this train is our country, and the rails are our territory! We all live inside this train!”

“You mean *all* of you?”

“Yes, everyone. This train is composed of fifty-five cars in total, and each car can hold four families of four. At present, this train has 934 people on board. People who live here carry out the duties assigned to them.”

Kino nodded, while Hermes asked from below.

“So, how many trains are there?”

“Oh, how did you know that there is more than one train?”

“Because of the double tracks. If the tracks were made for trains to pass by one another, then obviously there should be more than one.”

“That’s quite sharp of you. There are trains from one to four. This one is train no. 3. There are three trains consistently on the move, and the last one is reserved in case the others needed maintenance or refuelling. Our total population is 3,984 people.”

“The fact that there are trains running means that they must be connecting one place to another, right?” Kino asked.

“Of course,” the immigration inspector nodded.

Hermes butted in from below, “Well I doubt you’d say you’re doing this just for the heck of it. Not that I’m saying there aren’t people who think that way.”

“So, where do this train and the others connect to?”

“Kino and Hermes, are you aware of the five countries in this basin?”

“We heard about them. You mean those countries?”

“Yes. Our country is the train country. And it connects the four other countries at the edge of this basin!”

(3/6)

Kino pushed Hermes and moved inside the running train. They were headed towards the lead car.

The central part of the cars was wide, but the ceilings over the passageways were not too high because the upper part, as well as the areas to its left and right, served as living spaces.

The interior of the cars was coated with steel plates of a bright cream hue. It was well-maintained, and there wasn't any part showing any signs of rust.

The vibrations were very little inside the cars, and the noise made by the train as it passed through rail joints was only faintly heard.

"Everyone! We have a traveler over here. There's also a motorrad!"

The immigration officer yelled out as he guided Kino and Hermes along. Every time he did, the doors along the passageways would open one by one, and onlookers, mainly children with no work to do, would peek out and cheer.

While Kino acknowledged them with no particular expression,

"Hello!"

Hermes would greet them affably as Kino pushed him along the passageway.

"Well, it's been a while since we've had a traveler aboard you see. We thank you for contributing to the education of our young ones!" the immigration inspector said happily.

And then he began his explanation.

As he said in the beginning, their country was composed of four trains.

Their territory consisted of the rail tracks, and the railcar station where they do the maintenance and fuel resupplying for the trains.

The trains can run for twenty years with continuous maintenance and repairs, and the citizens live inside them.

The tracks traced a circular path inside the enormous basin.

Each train make their stops at four 'stations' in front of the walls of the four other countries. They carry aboard the things that can only be obtained or can only be produced from one country, and deliver them to the others.

"I see. Even though that single, huge country has been divided, they still continue to support each other," Kino said, and Hermes continued,

“And if this country shouldered this task, the rest don’t have to do too much. Cooperation at its finest.”

“Exactly,” the immigration officer nodded, and continued his explanation.

One country was about two days travel away from another country. During that time, the three trains run day and night without connecting with each other.

Each train would stop in a country for about half a day to load and unload its cargo. Grains, vegetables, meat, industrial goods—the products that each country specialized in—were being transported through this country.

During the long explanation, the descriptions of the different train cars would sometimes come up.

“This is the engine car. It’s an enormous diesel engine.”

“This is the dining car. Are you hungry, Kino? Oh, not yet?”

“This is the school car. See the children are studying. Kids, there’s a traveler over here!”

“This is the tank car. This is where we store fresh water. It’s very important.”

“This is the armory car. It’s prepared in case bad fellows attack. There’s a cannon coming out of that ceiling.”

“This is the movie theater car. It’s the main form of entertainment in our country.”

Eventually, they finished touring about twenty cars, and yet were only halfway through to the lead car.

After the explanations were over, Kino asked the immigration officer a question while they were walking.

“When the country separated fifty years ago, each of the groups chose their preferred way of life. I am led to believe that your people chose this kind of life, and I am wondering about the reason behind it.”

“Oh yeah! We want to know why!” Hermes chimed in.

However the immigration officer’s reply was unexpected.

“So do we!”

“Huh?” “What?”

“We also want to find out why our founders chose this life fifty years ago...”

The immigration officer was looking up the ceiling, his gaze distant.

“So nobody knows...? That’s a surprise.”

“Shocking, really.”

Kino and Hermes expressed their honest impressions.

“I’m sure it is. Nobody knows. The ones who came up with this were the clan elders at that time. Oh, before I forget—”

The immigration officer began to speak of their history.

“Long ago, there lived five clans in this big country. However, they did not mingle with each other, and they could not get along so well. In time, they became more and more aware that no one would be happy as matters stand, and eventually talks of self-independence began to rise.”

“So we heard.”

“After that?”

“Four clans decided to establish their own countries. They built new walls, created new towns and tilled their own fields. Even our own clan could have built its own country someplace. And yet, our elders chose to use all their skills and effort into building an enormous train and in laying out rails in order to distribute goods to the four newly-built countries. And they bade their people to continue doing so. However, the reason for it all was wrapped in secrecy. There is nobody else alive at that time that knew, and who could tell us about it.”

“So you mean you’ll never ever find out?” Hermes asked.

“Actually, we’ll be able to find out very soon!” The immigration officer answered, his mouth forming an ear-to-ear grin.

Kino asked, “How? And when?”

“Our elders left behind a letter detailing the motive for building this country!

And it will happen twenty days later! It will be exactly the fiftieth anniversary of our country's founding! We'll be able to open the vault where this letter is, and we'll be able to find out!"

(4/6)

"You must be the traveler and motorrad who went aboard the train country?"

In an open café at one country's park, someone talked to Kino and Hermes.

It was one afternoon, three days after Kino and Hermes boarded the train. This was one of the four 'normal' countries situated in the basin, which Kino and Hermes entered the previous day. As usual, they will be staying for three days.

The one who spoke to them was a man about sixty years of age, with a completely bald head and wrinkled face. His expression was stiff. He held a tray with tea and two small donuts on it.

"Yes, that's right. So everyone here calls it the 'train country', I see," Kino answered.

The man requested to sit with them, and Kino readily agreed. He sat at the table opposite Kino. Hermes was beside her, propped on his center stand.

Without touching his lunch, the man questioned Kino, his expression still stiff.

"Tell me. What did those lot say about our country?"

Kino tilted her head.

"Nothing really. They've been kind to us during our two days there and told us a lot of things about their country, but they didn't really say much about the other countries."

"That's true. They did tell us about arrival times and what sort of cargo they load and unload at each country, however."

Even after hearing this answer, the man's expression did not loosen up.

Then he asked another question.

"Did they tell you the reason why they keep on running the trains?"

“No. It seems that they only followed the orders of their founders, and none of them knew exactly why they were doing it.”

“That’s what they said.”

“I see,” the man mumbled, then began to eat his donuts.

After he finished eating, Kino asked.

“You must be already alive fifty years ago. If it’s not too much of a bother, will you tell us what happened then?”

“...”

The man pondered for a while, then took two gulps of tea.

“Since you answered my question, it’s only right for me to answer yours,” so he said, then began.

“When I was ten years old, the once enormous country in this basin was divided into five. The adults at that time believed it was better to split up than to share the same walls with the other clans. And we believe it’s a good thing that happened. There were no wars that broke out even after the separation.”

“I see.” “Uh-huh.”

“However, the only thing we couldn’t comprehend was the train country’s actions. Why did they throw away the chance of forming their own country? And why did they choose to live like servants? If they could construct that kind of train with the knowledge, technology and manpower available to them, they could have just used it to build their own country.”

“That’s true.” “Indeed.”

“Everyone’s baffled by it. Not only this country, but the others too. However, we had no way of finding out something that was kept secret by the very ones involved in that decision. Eventually, the four countries took advantage of that country’s actions, and settled down. If it were not for the train country, the divided countries probably wouldn’t be able to live in stability as they do now.”

After the explanation, the man finished up his tea.

“Anyway, I hope you enjoy your stay.”

With these words, he picked up his tray and stood up.

“Um, what kind of people are they? The clan who built the train country.”

Hermes’ question momentarily clouded the man’s expression.

He was silent for several seconds, and was probably thinking of leaving without answering, but in the end,

“You gave me an answer, so I will answer in return. That includes you, motorrad,” he spoke, then continued.

“Among the five clans, they were the most discriminated, despised, and persecuted.”

—

After they left that country, Kino and Hermes went around the remaining three countries.

And they also talked to the people there—

“What the people of the train country were thinking? No idea.”

“It’s really convenient. What happened in the past doesn’t matter anymore.”

“My grandmother told me that it was such an annoyance to be receiving help from that country. But they were indeed a great help.”

“If it weren’t for those fellows, we won’t be able to eat fresh vegetables here.”

And heard all sorts of impressions about the train country.

Beside the tracks was a well-paved road that was used for maintenance purposes. Kino and Hermes availed of this road to get around without having to board the train.

“You can just ride the train and sleep you know.”

“We can only stay in one country for three days. We’ve been there for two days already, and I am reserving the third and last.”

“But didn’t you say that there’s an exception to everything? Whatever, it’s fine with me because I like to move around.”

As they rode, the train passed by them several times.

The train that sounded its steam whistle flowed like a river beside Kino and Hermes.

In the evening, Kino camped out a bit ways off the road, assembling her tent under a tree.

And that night, there was a straight, stream of light that pierced through the jet black meadows, accompanied by the hum of the rails.

“What was that for...?”

Kino peeked out of the tent, muttering.

“Maybe it’s to let us know about *that*,” Hermes answered.

And finally the day came.

(5/6)

It was the twentieth day since Kino and Hermes found the train country.

“It’s been a while, Kino, Hermes. Do you wish to come aboard our country? Well, of course you do.”

It was under the same clear sky, in front of the same train they have boarded before, and the same immigration officer with a smile on his face.

“Yes, please,” Kino nodded firmly as she answered.

“Today is the commemoration for the fiftieth anniversary of the train’s first operations, right? And with it, the mystery behind this country’s founding, hidden inside a vault, will be unlocked too, correct?” Hermes asked in confirmation.

“It is the very day!” the immigration officer answered with his wide smile.

On this day, the trains stopped in their respective locations in preparation for the announcement that will be held at noon.

The long train Kino and Hermes boarded in have been running throughout the morning. Just before noon, it dropped its speed and eventually stood still in the middle of the meadows.

The observation car containing Kino and Hermes was positioned exactly at the top of a bridge.

It was a long and sturdy concrete bridge. The river, still with its gushing water, could be seen from the large windows at the side of the carriage.

“Because of this, we won’t make the schedule for our arrival on the next country, but maybe they can forgive us just for today,” the immigration officer shrugged.

“What a hardworking bunch. Nobody’s got any right to complain even if you slack off for one or two days, you know,” Hermes teased.

“That may be so, but you see, our country has always been proud of being on time as much as possible,” the immigration officer answered with a smile.

Noon approached closer and closer.

The citizens stayed in their posts—at school, at work, and in their own rooms—listening to the radio or to the train broadcast, eager to hear the truth from fifty years in the past. The train was pervaded with a restless atmosphere.

“It’s about time...,” Kino muttered.

“Now then, time to find out the reason behind all this!” Hermes exclaimed.

“This is the day our country’s history begins anew! And you shall bear witness to this, Kino, Hermes!”

Even the immigration officer had a face like that of a child before a field trip.

Time passed little by little, and at last, the wall clock indicated noon.

Music rang out from all of the speakers. Everybody stood up and began to sing a song. The lyrics were along the lines of ‘the rails shall forever go on’.

Kino and Hermes silently waited throughout the singing of the anthem.

[Everyone, this is the chief conductor of train no. 2 speaking.]

The voice of a middle-aged woman was transmitted crisp and clear from the speakers.

“It’s the current head of our clan. In short, our country’s leader. It’s her turn this year.”

The immigration officer explained in a whisper.

[Right now, I have in my hands the letter left to us by our great founders. The reason for our incessant voyage for the past fifty years is written here. —*‘If you are still continuing to run the train to this day, break open the seal and announce its contents’*— Such is written on the envelope, and is exactly what I will be doing now.]

The announcement was handed down in a stiff voice, indicative of its owner’s nervousness.

Kino surveyed the scene inside the train. Among the people waiting for the historic announcement, there were some who looked just about to collapse from excitement, and a few who were already moved to tears.

[I myself have not yet read its contents. I shall break the seal, and immediately read everything word for word, regardless of what kind of message it contains.]

The words were followed by the sound of an envelope being opened, and of paper being unfolded.

Inside the train that has grown silent, the chief’s voice echoed.

[To you citizens fifty years in the future, we leave this letter. —Once, our history was beset with sorrow, back when this basin was one big country. For a long time, our people were treated with undue persecution. We were mocked and abused, for we were regarded as the lowest of the low. And so, when it was decided that the country shall be divided into five, we made up our minds.]

It must be a rather concisely written letter. The voice stopped short, and the next sound heard was the turning of pages.

[To construct a railroad, and to aid the four newly-formed countries. To bear the burden of transporting commodities in order to assist in building their nations, and later on, to support their way of life. And lastly, to continue doing so for the next fifty years. That you are reading this right now only means that you have performed your duties splendidly. And that is a joy to us.]

Perhaps the letter was written in big characters, for once more, the shuffling of papers was heard.

[And now we shall tell you the reason for it all. You shall now find out the truth that has been kept away from you. It is all—for you, my people, to cease the function of the trains from this day forth.]

There was a stir among the citizens around Kino and Hermes.

The message from fifty years past went on, conveyed with the bewilderment of the one reading it.

[Confusion will almost certainly reign among them. Without the means to maintain their current way of life, they will be plunged into dispute. This is the ultimate revenge that we have dreamed of—the moment when our years of resentment will finally be laid to rest.]

The carriage, which was wrapped in silence, was disturbed by the sound of the turning leaves. It echoed, like the hum of a blade being polished.

[After all of this is over, you are free to live as you desire. Once our revenge has been realized, you need not feel any more bitterness toward them. Confer among yourselves, and decide the path you shall take next. We wish that your future be of happiness.] After several moments of silence—

[T-that's it.... That... would be all.]

From the speakers out came the chief's trembling voice.

(6/6)

The atmosphere in the carriage where Kino and Hermes were in transformed from that of festival into that of a funeral.

Nobody spoke, and the humans inside it stood like life-sized dolls in a diorama.

Kino who was watching over this scenery looked out of the windows,

“ ... ”

And saw the river gushing as lively as before.

[E-everyone...]

The first one to speak out was the chief.

Everyone came back to their senses and turned their attention to the speakers once more. The speakers attached to the ceiling emanated a wavering atmosphere, as if it could feel the helpless gazes directed to it.

[W-w-w-what...]

The chief fumbled for the words she was to say next—the words she *has* to say next—to her people, who at that time were united in mind and thought in anticipation of her response.

[W-what are we supposed to do now?]

“Oh my,” Hermes said in a tiny, tiny voice, so that only Kino would be able to hear him. “What’s going to happen?”

Kino also answered in a whisper, “That is something this country’s people will have to decide on. But I don’t think there’s any need for them to rush into a decision.”

Kino’s words weren’t exactly said aloud, but the chief’s next words were,

[T-to all chief conductors... I would like to hear your thoughts on this after two hours. Please discuss this among the adults and come up with your stance.]

—

During the tumultuous two hours that followed inside the train—

Kino and Hermes mostly kept quiet. And,

“As we are no citizens of this country, I don’t think we have a say on this matter.”

“Same here.”

Were all that Kino and Hermes said.

—

And two hours passed.

In the end, the sentiments that were gathered from each train, as announced by their respective chief conductors—

Were all the same.

—

“You were late! And by more than two hours, too!”

The workers from the third train were scolded in front of the walls of one country.

“We are very sorry. We will unload the cargo right away.”

They loaded and unloaded cargo just as they always have. They worked harder than ever to make up for the delay.

And the citizens of that country said,

“You’re such a great help! If it weren’t for you, the country would have stopped functioning a long time ago!”

And began to help with the work.

Kino and Hermes looked at the scenery beyond the open windows of the train.

“So Kino do you want to help too?” Hermes asked.

“Nope,” Kino answered, and began her preparations for departure.

—

“You’re getting off here? Don’t you want to stay until noon tomorrow? If you’re heading west, we can get you there.”

Kino answered the surprised immigration officer,

“To do that, you will have to stop the train in the middle of the route, and will be delayed by a minute or so, right? We have imposed on you so much already.”

“I see. Well this is goodbye. We were happy to have met you. May you continue to have a wonderful journey ahead.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Good luck to all of you!”

Kino and Hermes set off, leaving behind the immigration officer and the children bidding them farewells from the train’s windows.

As soon as they started running on the road beside the tracks, they heard a high-pitched whistle from behind. Soon, the gigantic train heartily caught up with them.

They looked at the enormous train that was gradually getting smaller as it ran farther and farther away.

“I was surprised when everybody answered the same thing. I was so sure there would be at least one who would have a different opinion,” Hermes said.

“We haven’t heard the viewpoints of the people from fifty years ago, however,” Kino answered as she gazed at the rails at the right side of the road.

“Maybe that country as it is now was the kind of country they wanted to build,” said Hermes. And then, “Kino, stop for a bit.”

“Hmm?”

Just as she was told, Kino stepped on the brakes.

They stood stock still in the middle of the meadow path.

“All right! Now it’s the end of end of Kino’s journey!” Hermes suddenly announced cheerfully. And two seconds later, “Okay, now it will start all over again. Let’s go!”

“Haha, nice of you to remember, Hermes.”

Kino loosened the accelerator.

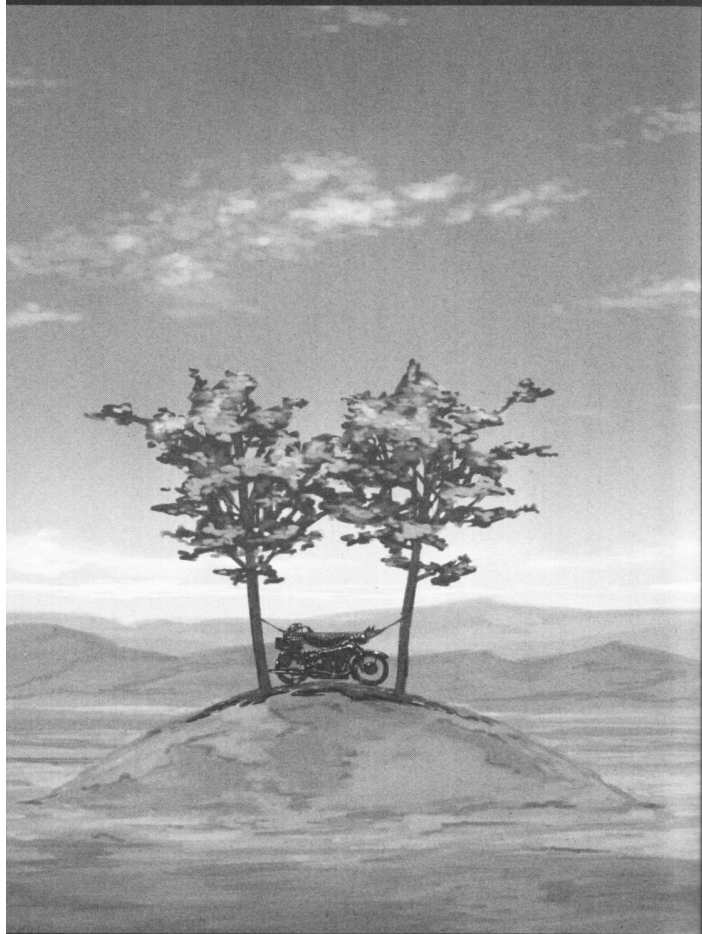
And as she looked at the sceneries flowing past them,

“Hm, I wonder what kind of country we’ll arrive in next?”

Kino mused, the question not directed to anyone in particular.

Hermes answered.

“Maybe it’s a country wondering what kind of travelers would visit them next!”



第十二話
「旅の終わり」
— Kino's Nap —

Chapter 12: "The End of a Journey" —Kino's Nap—

(1/1)

One early summer, on a certain hill in a meadow.

Amidst the vast land covered with grass so evenly that it looked like the surface of a calm lake, was a lone, bulging hill that resembled a lump.

And on the highest point of that hill, were two trees.

For some reason or other, this pair of thick trees sprouted in just that spot, all alone in the middle of a land covered by nothing but a green carpet of grass. It reminded one of a gate, as if there was an entirely different world beyond it.

And between these two trees, was a net hammock.

"This is really perfect."

Kino, who was sleeping on the hammock, said.

"It's so comfy. I'm sure this is best place and time to sleep in a hammock."

True enough, the distance between the two trees seemed to have been just for the sake of hanging a hammock in their middle.

The canopy of thickly growing green leaves and branches concealed the bright rays of the sun shining up above the blue sky, and instead offers the shade of the tree to the soul resting beneath it.

The soft breeze afforded a pleasant atmosphere and carried with it the scent of the grass and the meadows.

Kino was lying on the hammock with her jacket on and with her head resting on the makeshift pillow she made of her hat.

"Ah, this feels so good," she said as she stretched out her arms sideways.

Meanwhile, Hermes was parked on his center stand right beside the

hammock. On his luggage carrier was a travelling bag, with a cup on top of it.

Kino took the cup, and slightly lifted her head to drink the tea it contained.

“Motorrads (note: a two-wheeled vehicle, only to mean that it doesn’t fly) aren’t made to be used as tea tables,” Hermes murmured a complaint. “And what do you mean by the best place and time for a hammock nap? Not running a motorrad in this perfect weather is a sin, I say!”

Kino answered as she put down the empty cup on the grumbling Hermes.

“Likewise, it is a crime not to take an afternoon nap in a day with such fine weather.”

“Whatever. Just go and sleep on that hammock forever,” Hermes declared in resignation.

“Good idea... My journey has come to an end. Here I shall... sleep.”

“Fine, fine. It’s the end of ‘Kino’s journey’ —Ok, so what are you going to do from here on?”

“I told you I’m going to take my nap... with all my might.”

“Then? Do you plan to sleep until tomorrow morning?”

“Of course not. I’ll wake up by evening just before it becomes too cold.”

“Then what are you going to do when you wake up?”

“When I wake up... I’ll start my journey.”

“What? *Start?*”

“Hermes, what I mean is...”

Kino lightly placed her hat on top of her head, and covered her ears with its flaps. Only her mouth moved as she has finished her preparation for her nap.

“Pondering about ‘the end’ of my journey leads me to think that it would really be the end. And if by chance, I woke up and the next thing I do is to travel again, then that means an entirely new journey has begun.”

“But isn’t that just a different way of thinking about the same thing?”

“That’s right. But you know humans only form thoughts in one place—their

heads.”

“I was sure you sometimes used your stomach to think, Kino.”

“Yeah, but there is an exception to everything. —Anyway, other than by conscious thoughts, a person’s circumstances also vary depending on his or her way of thinking.”

“Well it’s true that a situation becomes painful if someone thinks it is painful, and fun if someone thinks it is fun.”

“That’s right. Also, if you convince yourself that what you’re experiencing is the toughest ever, then you think of everything that comes after it as fun.”

“Okay, I do know that much, Kino. But so what?”

“What do you mean? That’s it.”

“Eh? Didn’t you start talking about these finicky stuff because you’re trying to prove a point?”

“Huh? Not really.”

“Then what was that about?”

“You see, when I think about complex stuff, I get sleepy...”

“In short, you only said all of that because you wanted to sleep!”

“Yeah.”

“ ... ”

“So, my journey ends here. If this were a radio drama series, it will be the ‘last time’.”

“Whatever.”

“Once I wake up... the continuation will begin, so please wait until then.”

“Fine, I’ll wait. You can count on that! It won’t do for motorrads to not move around!”

“Don’t worry... humans can’t go around walking with all that luggage in tow either...”

“You better wake up! Once you wake up, we’ll get moving! Wake up, you

hear!”

Kino grinned.

“All right... So... sweet dreams... Hermes...”

“Sweet dreams, Kino.”

And so Kino fell asleep.

Her sleeping face half-hid by her hat looked very much peaceful.

Even though he knew Kino wouldn’t hear him, Hermes whispered,

“Kino... our journey... has been so much fun.”

—

Roughly two hours later, Kino woke up and set off on a journey from this place

—

And that is another story.





第十三話

「神のいない国」

— Let's Get Hermes! —

Chapter 13: “A Land without God” —Let’s Get Hermes!—

Kino was inside a forest.

It was the middle of the night, and the forest was like spilled ink in its darkness. The sky visible beyond the leaves and branches of the trees was cloudy, barring the view of the stars and the moon.

Kino, wearing the usual vest on top of a dark green shirt, lay prostrate on the forest floor.

From the same vantage point as the short grass growing on the ground, Kino viewed the world beyond the scope of ‘Flute’.

Three hundred meters away was an area where the forest was cleared to give way to an open space.

Over there, a number of bonfires were ablaze, their smokes carried aloft and swayed by the breeze. The dull orange glow illuminated ‘them’ under its flickering light.

‘They’ were a group of about a hundred adults; men and women in roughly equal numbers, plenty in their twenties, and even more in their thirties. There was a clear bias towards this age range, with very few middle-aged people to be seen. Everyone was dressed in the same simple T-shirts and short pants.

And they were at the height of ecstasy.

They waved their heads about, dancing a dance that defies the definition of the word. Although dressed rather lightly already, some removed what little clothing they wore and wrapped each other in immodest embraces.

No sanity could be perceived from their eyes that reflected the orange glow of the bonfires. From time to time a senseless cry, audible even to Kino who watched from three hundred meters away, would come out from their mouths that frothed with drool.

They were drinking a liquid contained in buckets.

It was not possible to tell from afar what it was with only its dark brown color as a clue. With cups, they scooped and then drank the liquid that obviously served as more than a drink to moisten their throats. Then they carried on with their mad dance.

“ ... ”

Kino gazed wordlessly at this scenery for a while, but soon the round lens of the scope settled on a view of one man.

A young man, who looked composed amidst the frenzy that surrounded him.

He was dressed like everybody else, but his shirt was not stained dark brown. And a band—a red cloth with incomprehensible characters written on it—was wrapped around his left arm.

He was holding a long staff.

And with it, he violently shoved down another man who wobbled his way to him. The man collapsed onto another person, and without any protest, the two squirmed about with one still on top of the other.

The crosshairs of the scope overlapped with the head of the man with the staff.

Flute stood on its bipod with a cylindrical suppressor attached to its tip.

Kino's outstretched right forefinger touched Flute's trigger.

A mouthful of air in, followed by an exhale abruptly cut short—and the trigger was silently squeezed.

Flute trembled slightly and softly. No bullet casing got ejected from it.

Accompanied by a feeble stir, the bullet flied out and cleared the three hundred meter distance in a second. In short, it reached its target at the speed of sound—

And it hit the man's head.

The man fell down as blood spurted out of his head. The sound he made as he hit the ground went unnoticed, drowned by the senseless shouting around him.

Three seconds later, a woman came tottering, then tripped and ostentatiously

fell over the motionless body of the man.

Now coated with dust all over, the woman stood up as if nothing happened and continued to walk unsteadily, her empty eyes seeing nothing.

“...”

Kino pulled Flute's bolt, ejecting the empty casing manually, and then pushed the bolt back, sending the next bullet to the chamber.

“How many more left...”

Kino moved the scope and aimed at another man carrying a staff.

——

Two days before.

“You know, if you don't have my oil, chain, and sprocket changed now, it will cause us trouble later on!”

“Fine, fine. I got it, Hermes.”

Kino and Hermes were running on a road inside a forest.

Kino was wearing the usual black jacket, with ‘Canon’ and ‘Woodsmen’ installed in their respective holsters.

It was a morning in the beginning of summer. The sky was clear and the air was refreshing.

It was well beyond the season for young leaves, so the green of the forest has taken on a dark hue. The land was flat in all directions, and the road was perfectly level.

The path cut through the forest in a perfectly straight line, baring the earth's reddish brown color. It was muddy in places due to the rain that fell the previous day. Kino ran Hermes at a prudent speed, careful not to get any mud on his wheels.

“And as much as possible, get a skilled mechanic, okay? One with the parts we need, too.”

“Understood. It's only rumors, but it seems the next country has automobiles, so the parts probably won't be a problem. I can't answer for the skill of the

mechanics, though.”

“Well, while there are nice people with terrible skills, there are also gifted individuals with questionable character, after all.”

“And if you were to choose between the two?”

“I’ll go with the latter of course! To a machine, to always be in perfect running condition—getting ‘fixed’ in short—takes precedence above all. That’s how it is regardless of time or place, a ‘truth of this world’, so to speak.”

“A ‘truth of this world’ huh...? You sure know everything, Hermes.”

“I must say!”

“So, what time will you be waking up tomorrow then?”

“Who knows?”

The moment Hermes answered, they spotted the walls ahead of the road.

—

Upon entering, Kino and Hermes gazed at the map they borrowed as they left the walls behind.

It was a rather large country, and both the map and the actual view showed them a forest encompassing the area near the western gates.

It was clear that they could afford to preserve a forest within their walls because they have more than enough land for growing food. And a populace with enough to eat is evidence of a developed country.

After confirming their route, Kino drove Hermes towards the country’s capital.

The forest went on, almost as if they have not entered a country at all. Eventually they saw fields and livestock, and arrived at their destination a little before noon.

The center with its rows of ten-storey buildings also has vehicles running around, just as the rumors suggested.

“Setting character aside, is there a good mechanic around here?”

Kino and Hermes asked the people walking down the road, and eventually received word of a certain mechanic.

After leaving their luggage in a nearby hotel, Kino and Hermes headed to the repair shop they were introduced to.

And there they found its shopkeeper, a man who looked to be around his late forties. He was unshaven and wore oil-stained overalls.

“Hey, that’s one filthy motorrad you’ve got there,” the man declared bluntly and grumpily upon taking a single glimpse of Hermes, and went on, “First the chain, sprocket and oil. You’d better have the accelerator cable changed too. You may not notice it, but the bolts of the rear carrier and the center stand might have loosened up. The spokes of the front tires too, for that matter.”

—

Kino went back to the hotel after leaving Hermes in the shop with a promise to return noon the next day, then went to a neighboring restaurant to grab a late lunch.

At the center of the roomy restaurant, there was a table with a hollow center filled with buckets of smoldering charcoal topped with wire grills, where the customers could barbecue ingredients of their choice from the assortment of meat and vegetables inside the refrigerators.

“It’s like a dream come true...”

Kino picked pork, beef, lamb, and chicken along with several vegetables.

“About that, ——has increased...”

While enjoying the meal, Kino overheard the intermittent dialogue two men were having over tea, a few tables away. They wore suits, and looked to be around their forties or fifties. There were no other customers.

There was a hint of distaste in their conversation.

“Maybe—— It’s about time they do something...——Beyond control...”

“If they can, ——probably do it.”

“——think they can handle it...?”

“The evidence was weak. —but, beyond that they could guarantee—”

They were obviously talking about some unwelcome circumstance. They talked ambiguously, using vague terms and leaving out specific details.

Not long after, they finished their meal much earlier than Kino who was eating more enthusiastically than usual because of the all-you-can-eat offer. They collected their bill and left.

The waiter who came to pick up their cups passed by Kino, “Tsk, this trash of a traveler is still eating...,” and muttered audibly, with a face showing outright disgust.

Kino pretended to hear nothing, and stood up to get another piece of meat.

—

“... That was the traveler who entered this morning, right?”

It was one of the men who were eating in the restaurant earlier, commenting as he looked at Kino beyond the windows.

“Huh? Oh yeah, the one with the motorrad, right? I heard the news. The motorrad’s not around probably because it’s in for repairs somewhere. Seems they’ve been asking around for a repair shop. But to think it’s a brat like that,” the other man replied as he fumbled in his breast pocket for the key of the car in front of them.

And as he was about to insert the key into the keyhole,

“Do you think... this one will do?”

His hands stopped as his companion whispered behind him, then answered,

“Get in!”

The two men hurriedly climbed into the car’s driver and passenger seats.

That moment, one of the men’s suits flapped open, revealing a hand persuader slung from his shoulders.

—

The next day.

Kino woke up at dawn.

The sky was clear outside the windows, but the wind was much stronger than the previous day's, carrying with it the scattered clouds from afar.

All alone in the room, being that Hermes was not around, Kino practiced quick draw with 'Canon' and 'Woodsman', and performed light exercises.

After this, Woodsman was emptied of bullets, and fed with the empty magazine. If the bullets are left to sit inside the magazine all the time, its spring will loosen, so it has to be allowed to rest occasionally by alternating full and empty magazines.

'Flute' was taken out next, and its front and rear parts assembled together. After checking its operation several times, Kino practiced aiming with its scope, targeting something far outside the window through the curtains that were parted very slightly so that the aim would go unnoticed.

The rifle was also examined for the number of bullets left inside, as well as the condition of its magazine. Only then was it disassembled and returned once more into the bag.

After breakfast, Kino spent the rest of the morning leisurely, washing clothes and checking and polishing camping tools.

Having nothing left to do after finishing these chores, Kino turned on the television inside the room.

A black and white drama show accompanied with a dull jarring sound appeared on the screen.

A beautiful farmer's daughter and a handsome man from the city were having an argument about their future. At this point, a burly man from another farming family cut in. Soon an argument flared up.

Kino watched absently as the two men began to exchange fists amidst a sudden, heavy downpour.

And as the woman who had jumped to stop the fight ate the punch from the farmer and collapsed in slow motion, the screen faded into a 'To Be Continued!' message, marking the end of the program.

“Maybe I should ask Hermes what’s going to happen in this story...,” Kino muttered, knowing that the continuation will be aired the next week, long after they had gone.

Then the commercials began.

Kino reached for a cup of tea, prepared not long ago.

First was a whisky commercial.

The actor who was in a farmer’s getup only moments ago now looked dandy with a stylish suit, saying stuff like how a man’s drink should be this-and-that. This lasted for thirty seconds.

The next was an advertisement for a restaurant.

The locations of the restaurant where a mother, father, and son were enjoying their hamburgers were pinpointed all over the country’s map, revealing its numerous branches. Then the restaurant’s name was sung along with a catchy tune. It was over in fifteen seconds.

And then, the next commercial.

[Won’t you become a new you?]

A man’s serene voice narrated while the solemn faces of young men and women flashed on the screen.

[Won’t you become a new you?]

[Won’t you become a new you?]

[Won’t you become a new you?]

[Won’t you become a new you?]

[Won’t you become a new you?]

The strange commercial went on, with the narration being repeated like this over and over again.

“Huh?”

The commercial suddenly caught the attention of Kino, who stopped sipping the tea.

[Won't you become a new you?]

With each narration, a pair of a man and a woman would transform their expressions into broad smiles.

[Won't you become a new you?]

The same thing, again and again, the meaning becoming even more dubious with each repetition. And after all pairs have changed their expressions into refreshing smiles,

[We will!]

They cried out all together, and the screen changed to one displaying what seemed to be a contact address and phone number. Then another narration,

[Yes you will! Together with us! —“Houden's Enlightened Society”]

The commercial that went on for a solid thirty seconds ended there.

Soon the opening track of another drama played, and Kino switched the television off.

“What's with that last commercial?” Kino muttered to no one in particular.

—

Around noon, Kino headed out on foot.

As it would be too hot to walk in, Kino turned the black jacket into a vest by removing its sleeves, then fixed Canon and Woodsman into their holsters, stuffed the hat, goggles, and gloves into a shoulder bag, and finally proceeded to the repair shop to claim Hermes back.

“Even such a small distance is so much trouble without Hermes...,” Kino muttered, trudging along underneath the sky that has become even cloudier.

Soon the shop came into view,

“Hm?”

And Kino immediately noticed that something fishy was going on.

There were several cars parked in front of the shop, which only yesterday had been empty except for vehicles in the middle of repair.

Most of the cars were painted white and blue, with red lights on their roofs.

Kino approached the shop surrounded by none other than police cars, and upon arriving, was immediately called out by a young police officer wearing a blue uniform.

“Ah! You’re the motorrad’s owner, right?”

Kino affirmed, and was guided into the shop. Inside were the shopkeeper and several police officers.

The shopkeeper looked at Kino with his stern expression.

“...”

But said nothing and only averted his gaze.

A police officer who looked to be around fifty, and the one who seemed to be the most senior among the group, addressed Kino.

“You must be Kino? I’m the deputy chief of the 3rd district in the south.”

Kino nodded in acknowledgement of the deputy chief’s self-introduction.

“Let me explain what happened. It’s a bit complicated, I’m afraid,” the deputy chief said, pointing to a chair beside the workshop. Kino sat, facing the officer and the shopkeeper.

“Please, go on,” Kino said neutrally. The deputy chief began.

“Then, I’ll relay the events in order. —Early this morning, this shopkeeper over here has taken out the motorrad—Hermes he’s called, I believe—for a test drive, after he had finished the repairs.”

“I see. And then?”

“When they returned here, a truck that had been tailing them parked nearby. Ten men stepped out, and lifted Hermes, who had been parked outside, and... carried him off with them.”

“.... And?”

“Of course the shopkeeper attempted to resist. He picked up a steel pipe and yelled at them. But—”

“But?”

“Unfortunately, they were affiliated with a religious group.”

“What?” Kino reacted with a tilt of the head.

“Oh, I guess this needs some explanation,” the deputy chief said, whose face was taken over by a grim look, and avoided Kino's gaze for a moment. “You may not believe it— On second thought, it’s precisely because you are a traveler that you understand how countries have their own rules...”

With a dour face, the shopkeeper continued the words of the deputy chief who could barely let the words out. “In this country, religious groups are under the protection of the government!”

“Protection?”

Then the deputy chief continued as the shopkeeper turned away in disgust after his outburst. “Yes. This country is a multi-religious nation. Out of holding religious freedom in high esteem, religious groups are accorded with all sorts of benefits. To avoid favoring one religion over another, all organizations registered as a religious group are given these. To start with, there are tax exemptions of every kind, exclusion from military service for the leader, priority use of public facilities, and—” The deputy chief sighed, and continued. “Overlooking minor crimes.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Basically... in cases of crimes that can be settled by a fine, they can avoid arrest and prosecution. And that applies to cases of robbery, like what we have now—even if the shopkeeper fought back and got himself hurt. It’s a good thing he didn’t go through with it.”

“Oh...,” was all Kino could say upon hearing the officer’s words.

“It’s strange no matter how you think of it! Who could have been stupid enough to make up such a rule?!” The shopkeeper’s eyes widened, shouting out in exasperation in Kino’s stead.

And the deputy chief anxiously turned to Kino and explained, as if guilty of the crime.

“It’s an old law in place way back when this country was founded. You see, religion serves to support the human spirit. And the notion was, it is harder for people to overlook certain transgressions when they are united. That said, there were no groups who openly committed crimes like this in the past, so it’s not something we ever had to enforce.”

“But now there is.”

“You’re right.... This time, the one who took Hermes away are members of the newest religion in this country. They call themselves ‘Houden’s Enlightened Society’.”

The name sounded familiar to Kino.

“Uh, the one airing that weird commercial?”

“That’s correct. You’ve seen it?”

“Yes. What kind of religion is it?”

The deputy chief considered the question for a couple of seconds before coming up with an answer.

“It was a new religion formed by the Houdens, an immigrant family who came here a year ago. Even among the religions we have here, their teachings were quite different. They worship no particular supreme being, and according to the members, their goal is to find ‘a new self through interaction with others’.”

“Just say it outright! They’re nothing but a bunch of shady fellows with more than a few loose screws!” the shopkeeper interjected.

“To put it frankly, yes. At least to everybody else except for their followers.”

After listening to the explanations of the deputy chief and the shopkeeper, Kino asked further, “Do they have many followers?”

The deputy chief replied. “Right now, they have around two hundred members. That may seem small, but until two months ago, they only had around ten. That’s a really odd development. The commercial started airing around that time too.”

“What kind of people convert into this religion?”

“Mostly young folk. Of course, in every era, there are youth who are unsure of their future. That insecurity leads to doubt and fear. And so—”

“They end up getting convinced by that commercial.”

“Well, yes. Others were recruited from university after agreeing to attend a conference to ‘discover themselves’. Those who have troubles are eventually suckered in by the friendly atmosphere. Even though they didn’t have any intention to get deeply involved, knowing full well that it was a religious group trying to recruit members, many still end up joining after experiencing how ‘nice’ it was there. It usually follows this pattern. This goes without saying, but there are no regulations against this kind of recruitment.”

“I get that,” Kino said, then asked. “So long story short, you are saying that this ‘Houden’s Enlightened Society’ took Hermes with them?”

“Yes. That’s too long, so let’s just call it ‘Houden Society’.”

“But what for? I don’t think he’d fetch much...”

“Those fellows claimed that they wanted to learn the ‘truth of this world’ from that motorrad,” the shopkeeper declared with undisguised disgust, and added, “And I just finished his tune-up too!”

“Learn the truth...? From Hermes? O...kay...?” Kino murmured with a tone in between shock and amazement. “So, where is this ‘Houden Society’? Can you take me there?”

“What are you planning to do by getting there?” the deputy chief asked.

“I’ll take Hermes back with me.”

“Do you think they’d give him back to you just like that?”

“I don’t, but it’s a step forward.”

“...”

The deputy chief, detecting a hint of a glare from Kino’s expression went on.

“Fine. I’ll take you there with the patrol car.”

—

Parting briefly with the shopkeeper, Kino got on the back seat of the patrol

car.

Because it would be inconvenient to wear a persuader behind one's waist while seated inside a car, Kino temporarily removed Woodsman and its holster out of the way.

Seeing Kino transfer Woodsman from waist to left hip, the deputy chief inquired with an oddly pleased look, "You sure seem comfortable using that from both positions. Plenty of combat experience, I suppose?"

"It's nothing to boast about," Kino answered.

The patrol car rushed off with a young police officer taking charge of the wheel.

—

The patrol car ran through the city and across the fields.

They took a momentary break in a gasoline stand, and entered the forest not long after.

While inside the vehicle, Kino heard more than one would care to know about the Houden Society and its founders.

Roughly one year ago, a couple by the name of Bob and May came to the country together with their eleven year old son, Gene.

The Houdens claimed to have abandoned their home country to spread their faith. They asked for permission to perform missionary work in the country.

And by the country's laws, they could not refuse the couple's request.

"We've found a new world!"

The Houdens tearfully proclaimed, and began to proudly, and enthusiastically propagate their religion.

At the beginning, nobody paid them any attention.

Even for the citizens of a country with so many religions, what the new faith was preaching was at best novel, and at worst, cryptic and disturbing. But recently, their organization experienced a sudden surge in membership with all the young recruits.

What was particularly notable about them was their secretive nature; most of their ardent believers live as one community in the facility that they were about to head to.

They bought an abandoned school and turned the building into a residential establishment and cultivated the land that surrounded it.

And there, they began to live a self-sufficient lifestyle.

Furthermore, no one except for members was allowed inside this facility, so details of their lives within were all but unknown. This was the first time a religious group has gone so far to keep their activities a secret.

The young recruits donate all the money they have upon joining the group, and would not come back home. They would not return even if their families come to take them back, and in some cases they would even refuse to see anyone.

The parents come to plead their case, but because of the guarantee of religious freedom, and also because citizens over eighteen years of age are considered old enough to think on their own, the police cannot step in.

“That’s about everything you need to know,” the deputy chief said with a cold tone, almost as if to disavow any involvement, and,

“Truth be told, the police do not wish to get tangled in anything concerning religious groups. Especially this one. It’s nothing but trouble,” the deputy chief admitted.

—

The patrol car proceeded a little bit further into the forest, and soon entered a deserted village.

The dilapidated buildings lined up both sides of the road going through the village, which was apparently abandoned because of its distance from the town. There was not a soul in sight. Only the electric cables hanging from the poles stretched across the road.

And when they proceeded deeper into the forest, they finally caught sight of the aforementioned establishment.

They could see the school building, a long, three-storey structure. It was old, as evidenced by the cracks in its glass windows and its broken passageways sloppily repaired with wooden planks.

There were no other structures except for this school building, with a number of old trucks and buses that lay neglected right beside it. The bodies of the vehicles were rusted, and the tires have sunk into the ground.

The wide, adjoining playing field was left abandoned, and scattered with traces of bonfires all over.

Freshly tilled fields encircled the vast space around the school. And working the fields were plenty of young men and women.

They were mostly in their twenties, all humbly garbed in identical T-shirts and short pants. They were silently harvesting the green leaves of plants that grew up to their waists.

There were quite a number of them, perhaps because the work relied heavily on manual labor. One field alone has fifteen to twenty people working on it. And as there were seven fields, there can be no less than a hundred of them at work.

They gazed at the approaching patrol car with blank eyes,

“...”

And continued on their work, as if they had not seen anything.

“All their members are like that, living and working in this facility. The Houden couple had brought in the seeds of that grass, which all of them brew into tea and drink. Apparently they were planning to sell it in the future, but it’s doubtful how they’re planning to make a living out of it when our country has its own traditional tea,” the deputy chief explained.

“I see.... Well... I didn’t come here for the tea...”

“Do you see those fellows wearing red armbands?” the deputy chief asked.

“Yes,” Kino answered.

Indeed among the group, a few were wearing red bands around their arms. They held long staffs, apparently for supervising the tea-harvesting.

“It seems that those are ‘senior followers’. They joined relatively earlier than the others, and have advanced well up the ladder of their organization.

“I see. Well, that has got nothing to do with me either.” As Kino declared bluntly, the patrol car stopped.

At the very center of the school building was its biggest entrance, from which several followers wearing armbands came out. Then they stood a few meters from the car without surrounding it, and waited for its passengers to alight.

“See, they aren’t foolish enough to get in trouble with the police, either.”

The deputy chief said to Kino and came out of the patrol car after instructing its driver to remain inside. Kino also stepped out from the other side.

“Good day! This traveler and I would like to have a word with the Houdens. If I may be so rude, I’d like to have someone relay this message to them immediately.”

It was a friendly tone, but forceful enough not to warrant a mere ‘yes or no’ response. The followers, as expressionless as before, told them to wait for a moment, and two of them vanished inside the building.

While waiting, Kino observed the school’s surroundings.

It was a rather old school building made of horizontal planks fitted together. From among the unbroken windows, there were several faces staring down at them.

The door of the school building opened.

“My, oh my, if it isn’t the deputy chief!”

A man appeared with this cheerful greeting.

He was a rather stocky man who looked to be around his forties. Both his face and his belly were so round to the point of bursting, it seems he would roll quite a distance if he happened to fall.

He was dressed in the same shirt and pants that the others wore, but the hem was too short to accommodate his bulging middle. He had short blonde hair, a generous beard, and a good-humored smile.

“I am Bob Houden. I am this organization’s representative, and the one responsible for all of its actions. May your soul be enlightened!” The man with features like that of a good-natured peasant said as he approached the deputy chief and Kino.

He turned to Kino and introduced himself with a big smile. “So how may I be of help to you? Do you wish to join us? We welcome you with open arms!”

The deputy chief answered Bob’s question.

“I heard there was a motorrad called Hermes brought in here. Is that true?”

Bob answered immediately.

“Of course, of course! We bought him!”

“Bought?”

“Why yes. Not too long ago, some people—well, we don’t really know who they are—came here to sell us the motorrad. To us, this is the perfect opportunity to gain experience and knowledge from the point of view of something which is not human. So we decided to buy him. It’s a step to paving our path to the truth.”

“...”

From beside the deputy chief who was now making a bitter face, Kino spoke.

“Hermes is my partner. I heard he was taken from the repair shop by some of your followers.”

“Goodness! Are you telling me that there are among my brethren here capable of such a vile act? Unbelievable! But even if that were indeed the case, from our point of view, he was legally purchased without knowledge of such a thing—”

In the middle of Bob’s explanation, several young followers came up from behind him.

“Yo, Kino!”

They were pushing Hermes along.

“Um, looks like I got kidnapped while I was sleeping. Know where this is?”

As Hermes said in his usual tension-free manner, he was put on his stand beside the concerned parties. The young followers stepped back, and a woman holding a child's hand appeared.

The woman in her forties wore the same, simple clothes and held a peaceful expression, while the dainty boy clinging to her had flawless, adorable eyes and clothes that fit him perfectly.

"This is my wife, May, and my son, Gene."

With Bob's introduction, May gave a small bow, while Gene hid behind his mother without saying a word.

"May and Gene take pleasure in their conversations with the motorrad. But before everything else, we have to baptize him. I am planning on letting my son Gene think of a name for him, you know, to foster his sense of independence."

Kino turned to the overly ecstatic Bob.

"I would like to ask you to return Hermes," Kino declared coolly.

Bob tilted his head exaggeratedly.

"Oh my, it seems there is some misunderstanding here, traveler. We bought him without knowing that he was stolen, so we don't have any obligation to return him to you. Isn't that right, officer?"

"That's true...," the deputy chief admitted. Without a moments delay, Hermes chimed in.

"Oh! Like an 'electrified worshiper'!"

"... You mean a 'bona fide purchaser'?" the deputy chief corrected.

"Yes that's it!" Hermes said, and fell silent.

Kino, whose hands were noticeably lowered down where Canon and Woodsman were, almost touching their grips, sighed and muttered audibly.

"That would be a problem."

At that moment, Bob trembled exaggeratedly.

"Aaaaah! Eeeeeek! What is that? Are you threatening me with your persuader?"

“Eek!”

May also shrieked in surprise, then crouched to embrace Gene in a protective gesture. Bob leaped to her side and continued to scream.

“Aah! Ghastly! Police officer, this is horrifying! Is this traveler a homicidal freak? Is this fiend planning to kill us with those persuaders? Terrifying! Dreadful! Barbaric!”

Behind them,

“How terrifying!”

“How dreadful!”

“How barbaric!”

“How easy it is for humans to turn into demons!”

The followers echoed their leader’s words while they run about in panic.

“ ... ”

Retaining a stony expression, Kino removed both hands away from the persuaders.

“Please rest assured. The police will not let that happen. Any traveler who harms an innocent citizen within the walls will not be allowed to take a single step back to this country.”

“Oh! Is that so! I am so relieved! You hear that? We will be protected by this police officer!”

Bob said to his wife and child, then grabbed the hands of the deputy chief and shook it up and down.

“Oh my! Thank you! Thank you very much! I was oppressed by the police in my homeland, so I am really glad to be able to live here in peace! Hooray for this heaven on earth! Hooray for religious freedom!”

The deputy chief gently removed Bob's hands, and turned towards Kino.

“This is really a problem, Kino. But, since we already know that Hermes is here and that they wouldn’t be selling him off anytime soon, maybe we should leave this place for the meantime? We’ll find the sneaks who took him. But first, why

don't we have a talk at the police station?"

Kino answered.

"Fine with me."

—

As they gazed at the patrol car speeding out of sight,

"Hah! What a cinch!"

Completely opposite his charming attitude a moment earlier, Bob sneered.

"You can say that again. Is this country full of nothing but idiots?"

May also transformed into an entirely different person.

"..."

Gene, who was still wrapped around her legs, suddenly squeezed hard with his arms. May hastily crouched and stroked his little head.

"Ah, I'm sorry. It will be fine. We will make sure everything works out. So don't worry, okay?"

While wrapped in May's embrace, Gene whispered something to her ear.

"Yes of course, I know that.... Now, why don't we get some tea?" May assured him. Then she carried the tiny twelve-year old up in her arms, and returned into the schoolhouse.

Bob followed, and as soon as he entered the building, he ordered the followers who converged by his side,

"I feel wonderful! I know it's been a long time, but rejoice! Tonight your efforts will be rewarded. Prepare for the party!"

—

Halfway through the afternoon, the sky became completely dim. It was mottled by the eerie black clouds that came riding the wind.

The patrol car rode beneath such an ominous slooking sky.

"Now... what should be done?" The deputy chief said, looking not at Kino but at the scenery beyond the left window.

Meanwhile, Kino was looking at the opposite direction.

“This is really getting worrisome.... I think this is the first time I’ve encountered this kind of setback ever since I’ve begun traveling.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I share your frustration. But even if you feel terrible at the moment, I still have to tell you something...”

“What is it?”

The two continued their conversation without looking at each other.

“They have the guts to say that because they know my presence there doesn’t mean the police will get in their way.”

“Knew it.”

“The police can only move once there is evidence of an illegal activity.”

“I understand.”

“We don’t have a police station anywhere near that facility of theirs, so we don’t even patrol the area. And it shouldn’t be surprising, because there’s nobody living in that place except for them.”

“I see.”

“Kino, you’re leaving by tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“I believe it’s possible to extend your stay if you request for it. But I’m sure you know that as matters are, hanging around here would make no difference.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m sorry for changing topics all of a sudden— but can you drive a manual four-wheel-drive?”

“I’ve tried it once.”

“You know, at the back of the police station, there’s a small farm vehicle that we confiscated a long time ago. The owner has abandoned it, and since nobody’s interested, we were planning to scrap it soon. Its key was left in its ignition switch, and still has plenty of fuel left.”

“That’s rather careless of you. If somebody noticed that, stealing it would be a piece of cake.”

“It’s no big deal. After all, it’s bound to get disposed in, say, somewhere in this bleak forest?”

“I see.”

The two paid no notice to the young driver, whose face stiffened upon hearing the direction their conversation is going, and whose feet loosened its grip on the accelerator pedal to avoid an accident.

The deputy chief went on. “Let’s talk about something else— You know, there’s this shop near the station that supplies us with bullets, wholesale.”

“I’m sure business must be booming for that shop.”

“Well, we are loyal customers after all. How would you like to see the place? They handle all kinds of ammunition there. I’m sure you’ll find the kind you need for traveling.”

“That’s a great idea. You’ve saved me the trouble.”

The young police officer’s arms shivered, causing the patrol car to wiggle off its path a bit. The deputy chief addressed the driver.

“Officer, will you please drive more steadily? We are in no hurry.”

“Y-yes, deputy.... I’m really sorry. M-my duty right now is to drive, so I’ll keep my attention to driving and nothing else!”

The young officer complied, and the deputy chief acknowledged it. “Of course. That’s a good decision.”

Then the deputy chief turned to Kino again and smiled,

“If you like, we can go there right now. If you are with me, you’ll get a discount.”

Kino looked back and answered,

“That would be very helpful. —While we’re at it, can you tell me where I can buy a green shirt?”

— —

And that evening.

“Fourteen.”

Kino has pulled the bolt for the fourteenth time, ejecting another bullet casing.

A pile of empty cartridges has collected beside Flute. The rifle itself has become feverish to the touch, with smoke rising up from its suppressor and barrel.

Kino had been firing non-stop for nearly ten minutes.

“Fifteen.”

One more shot, and a fifteenth life was snuffed out that night.

The senior followers downed by the mute shots, now with holes in their heads or chests, lay lifeless on the floor of what was previously the school’s playing field.

The rest, the ‘average’ followers, were mostly sprawled on the ground, asleep.

Others were raising up a fuss as they drank the mysterious liquid. They screamed and danced, oblivious of the fact that the senior members who had been observing them have lost their lives.

There were even those who forced the liquid down the throats of the dead, and licked the liquid—now mixed with the blood—that overflowed from the heads of the corpses.

“So it’s drugs after all...,” Kino muttered.

Kino would occasionally cease all movement and listen closely for any sound, then would cram bullets inside the magazines while constantly being on the lookout for anyone or anything approaching.

Nearby was Kino’s rucksack, which contained stacks of boxes of 7.7mm bullets. Only half has been used up.

These are subsonic rounds—bullets that don’t go beyond the speed of sound.

In exchange for the lack of shockwave, and consequently, a quieter sound

compared to a normal bullet, it can't be fired in automatic, and the rifle has to be manually cocked with each shot.

“Sixteen...”

After the sixteenth shot, not a single one of the supervisors with staffs were left.

Kino replaced Flute's bullets with normal rounds.

Even if there were plenty of bullets, the number of magazines is limited, so Kino had to quickly refill the empty ones.

At the bottom of the rucksack, there were four mini pressure-cookers.

But there were cables sticking out of their tightly closed lids, which were then connected to tiny battery-powered alarm clocks.

After setting the hands of the clocks and inserting batteries inside, Kino hid one under a tree, and left the other three to different spots, a little bit apart from each other.

Then Kino shouldered the rucksack that contained several magazines inside.

“Now then...”

With Flute on the ready, Kino slowly walked inside the nearly pitch black forest.

—

Making sure that there were no traps around, Kino carefully proceeded among the trees, and took a detour soon after reaching the school yard where there were still several people in uproar. Kino went to the opposite side of the school building and found a place where there was a clear view of its entrance.

Ahead, there were no longer any trees to hide in. There was only field upon field of the plant that was the source of the drugs, split by a single road that led to the school building a hundred meters away.

Kino hid beside the big trunk of a tree, and peeked at the dark school building through Flute's scope. Not a single light was lit among its numerous rooms. The building appeared like a single black mass.

And there, Kino waited.

—

A few minutes later, the hands of the first alarm clock overlapped with the designated time.

A thunderous blast resounded through the forest.

The improvised pressure cooker bomb exploded, scattering fumes and shockwave together with a momentary blaze.

The explosion rocked the trees, and the birds in the middle of their sleep flew up all at once. Several windows facing the school yard shattered in a rain of broken glass.

Six seconds later. The lights in the building went to life.

The lamps lighting the third floor lit up, one after the other from left to right. Amidst this were the silhouettes of the people inside, clearly in a panic.

The people, now more visible, became the new targets of the scope.

“ ... ”

And Kino fired.

A much louder sound than before, but still largely suppressed by the silencer, echoed. The golden casings fell to the right side while the bullet flied ahead to its target.

The bullet, now accompanied with several times more shockwave than before, rotated clockwise in the air as it flew, then hit the glass of a window and consecutively pierced the heart and lungs of the person behind.

As casually as plucking weeds, Kino took out eight people before changing Flute's magazine.

And still ever so vigilant, Kino changed locations, and lay beside of another tree while spying on the school building.

The lights of the building were on, but the signs of movement from inside has completely vanished.

Three full minutes devoid of any sound passed. During this time, Kino waited

without making the slightest motion.

Eventually there was movement by the entrance.

There were two men and three women.

“Stop this!” “Stop!” “Please stop!”

They shouted as they emerged from the entrance. All of them wore white aprons.

The five spread out in a fan-shaped formation, and dashed away. One headed straight towards the direction where Kino was hiding.

“Please don’t shoot! We don’t know anything about this! You can take your motorrad!”

Kino fired at the woman who approached with these words. She fell right where she stood, and exploded.

The bomb she was concealing detonated, blowing to bits not only her arms and legs, but her entire body. Blood and flesh scattered along the road, and melded with the surroundings.

Among the remaining four, the two nearest to the woman fell down from the blast. The momentum of their fall activated a switch or pulled a string, and set off the bombs they were carrying.

The man and woman at the farthest edge of the formation stopped as they were rained on by red drops.

Perhaps this brought them to their senses, as the two suddenly stripped off and threw away the shoulder bags hidden underneath their clothes, and ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

“I wonder if it’s about time...,” Kino muttered and stood up, removing and putting away Flute’s silencer.

Then Kino fired Flute away, not aiming at anyone or anything in particular, only squeezing the trigger as fast as possible, and only taking care that the bullets hit the school building.

The high-pitched shots rang, echoing in between the forest and the school

building. The bullets drilled through its thin plank walls and shattered its glass windows.

Kino fired, replaced the empty magazine, then fired some more. Ten shots in, the second and the third bombs exploded within five seconds of each other.

The consecutive loud roars and the shaking of the school building from the attacks soon made the ones trying to hide inside it realize the futility of their situation. And they moved just as Kino had anticipated.

In short, they began to flee, leaving the building from all possible directions and out of any conceivable exit it has.

First there was only a couple, but it increased to ten, and soon dozens were trying to get out. The people in the school yard who were woken up by the commotion also moved about in confusion, and wobbled their way into the forest.

Kino pounded away, taking care to aim so that the bullet would pass just over their heads, or hit the ground under their feet.

And finally the last bomb detonated. The surroundings trembled along with another thunderous roar.

Consecutive explosions and incessant persuader fire—

These engulfed the people in terror not even the drug could negate. Soon there was chaos. With shrieks and screams, they vanished into the forest like baby spiders scurrying away from their disturbed nests—

And not a single one came back.

Amidst the world that suddenly turned silent,

“I should have come up with this strategy earlier...,” Kino murmured while putting down Flute. The rifle was so hot that a careless touch would have given one a particularly painful blister.

—

Leaving Flute and all of its ammunition behind, Kino slowly approached.

Kino proceeded in between the fields of the narcotic grass, extracting

‘Woodsman’ from its holster along the way. A harmonica-shaped silencer was attached to the tip of its barrel.

After crossing the fields, Kino made a dash for the building.

The stench of the scattered blood and bowels of the corpses on top of the road drifted about, attracting the flies, which were indeed beginning to gather in the air. Kino took care not to step on these, and passed through to the side of the school building.

Kino tried to sense for any indication of life before swiftly entering through the wide-open doors,

And while keeping Woodsman’s aim at eye level, Kino walked through the deserted corridor. There was no other sound that could be heard except for Kino’s own footfalls.

Taking a peek into one classroom, Kino only saw cluttered blankets and scattered cups and buckets that contained the same dark brown liquid, or at least, what remained of it. There was nothing resembling furniture; only the wooden boards on the floor and the thin blankets adorned the room.

Kino went up to the end of the first floor and jogged up the stairs, climbing all the way up to the third floor.

Still finding nothing there, Kino proceeded to the stairs on the opposite side of the building and went down to the second floor and checked all its rooms, but found only the bodies of the senior members and nobody else.

“ ... ”

Kino returned to the first floor, and began to search its remaining half.

There was a relatively large room that must have been used as a faculty room in the past.

Seeing that it was furnished with tables, cabinets, and other useful furniture, it likely belonged to the founders, the Houden couple.

But there was nobody inside. And Hermes was nowhere to be seen either.

“ ... ”

Trying to detect any trace of warmth, Kino stroked the mattresses and the blankets, but found nothing.

And upon exiting the school building, now silent enough to be called a haunted mansion, Kino looked left and right, searching the surroundings—the road, the fields, and the forest that was being illuminated by the lights through the windows—and finally caught sight of the abandoned trucks and buses artlessly discarded in one area.

“...”

The graveyard of vehicles was roughly fifty meters away. Quietly and with no hesitation, Kino kept a firm grip on Woodsman and proceeded there with only legs in motion.

There was only three meters left. Kino pushed the tiny switch on one side of Woodsman’s grip.

Kino pointed the red laser sight that emerged from underneath the barrel towards the platform of a windowless truck, the biggest among the vehicles.

And almost at the same time, a roar that did not belong to a persuader was heard. It was a sound that Kino knew well—Hermes’ engine, its slightly muffled sound echoing through the quiet night.

Kino realized where the sound was coming from, and continued forward while keeping a steady aim. At the same time, the door of the truck’s platform suddenly opened outwards.

“YAHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

With the amplified sound of Hermes’ engine was Bob’s scream, loud enough to compete with the motorrad’s.

And Bob appeared, his fat body on top of Hermes, screaming as he launched forward.

He rushed from within the truck, jumped off its platform, and speeded as he landed on the road.

“I’LL CRUSH YOUUUUUUUUUU!”

Hoping to ram into Kino, Bob charged forward at a fierce speed, his flabby

cheeks flapping with the wind.

“WHOAAAAAAAAAA!”

Hermes hollered at the same time, though it was up to debate whether he was doing so out of surprise or excitement.

“...”

Kino trained Woodsman’s laser sight onto Bob’s chest and waited, not moving a single step away.

Hermes and Bob closed in.

“TAKE THIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIS!”

With the gears still on high, Bob curled his body and closed his eyes just before the anticipated clash.

And as if this was a signal, Kino faced the back, took a light step to the right, and used that foot as a pivot to turn counterclockwise—and much like a matador evading a bull’s horns, dodged Hermes’ handles that was milliseconds away from collision.

Meanwhile, with left arm outstretched, Kino fired Woodsman.

Three consecutive silenced rounds accompanied by three soft whiffs—so close together that it almost sounded like a single bang—and three tiny bullet casings took to air.

The tiny .22 caliber bullets pierced Bob’s left arm,

“Gyaah!”

Making him cry out from the intense pain.

With his left hand now useless, Bob could no longer control Hermes.

And because his accelerator was in full throttle, Hermes’ rear wheels continued to spin madly as he slanted violently to the left. In a moment his balance gave way, and he crashed down, generating sparks from his handle and step.

And as Bob’s body was flung off from him,

“KINOOOOOOOOOOOOO! THAT WAS MEAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!”

Hermes screamed away in reproach, and skidded sideways for a few meters more, his frame grinding with the surface.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Bob fell on the side, his curled body rolling like a ball.

While dodging nimbly, Kino’s right hand was busy extracting Canon and raising its hammer. And right after firing Woodsman to the left, Kino immediately turned to the right,

“DIEEEEEEE!”

And saw May, plunging forward while swinging a tiny axe overhead.

There was a single shot.

In an instant, white smoke characteristic of liquid propellant unfurled, then disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared.

The .44 caliber round from Canon hit the handle of the axe, fracturing three or so of May’s fingers and forcibly tearing it off her tight grip.

The axe danced in the air, and it spun, making its way down towards May who was slumped on the ground. It was about to fall on her head.

“Guh!”

A groan accompanied the dull thud the axe made when its blunt end hit the back of her head. May became absolutely still, with froth coming out of her mouth.

“...”

Kino stood there for several more seconds, still gripping both persuaders firmly, on the ready for anything that could happen.

To the left, Bob lay face up, and on the opposite side, May was hunched over. And both of them lay there, unmoving.

Meanwhile Hermes was still on the ground, lying on his left side, voicing out his grievances.

“I know Master taught you to keep your wits about you after a battle. To remain on your guard, so to speak. But don’t you know how a motorrad collapsed on the ground feels? It’s terrible, like a person held upside down! I told you that before haven’t I? So will you do me a favor and raise me back up right now? I mean *right* now? And since we’re at it, won’t you rush over with arms wide open, crying out ‘Oh Hermes, are you all right?’ while lifting me up without a moments’ delay? Pretty please?”

—

“Hey!”

Returning Canon to its holster, Kino ignored Hermes’ plea, and instead, with Woodsman still in hand, walked towards the opposite direction—that is, towards the truck where the couple had been hiding—and stood in front of it.

“Come out,” Kino said while flashing Woodsman’s laser into the dim platform.

“Eek!”

There was a tiny shriek, and eventually, a tiny form emerged from the darkness.

With a completely terrified expression, Gene came up to the edge of the truck’s platform with both hands held at shoulder-height.

“I-I’m scared of c-climbing off so... c-can I put my hands down...?”

When Kino nodded, Gene held on the edge and gingerly made his way down the truck. He stood with his bare feet on the rough pavement.

“D-did you... kill m-mommy and daddy?” Gene asked Kino, his tiny eyes so big, they couldn’t possibly get any wider.

While shining Woodsman’s laser slightly above the space between his eyes—that is, right on his forehead,

“No, they’re still alive. Even if I leave them as is, the police will come and get them tomorrow.”

“W-will I die here?”

Before Kino could answer the question,

“Kino!” Don’t kill that one!” Hermes shouted from the back.

“I know!”

Kino answered aloud without turning to where Hermes was.

“Hey what’s up with that? This is no fun!”

Gene said with a grin.

—

The frightened expression has completely disappeared from Gene’s face.

In its place was a genuinely innocent, childish smile.

“...”

With Kino’s aim still trained on his forehead,

“Fine, kill me. I’m sick of being alive anyway. Go on, shoot. You haven’t killed that much yet, right? That can’t be enough for a murderer like you!” Gene declared, as if trying to provoke Kino.

“So you’re the ringleader after all.”

Kino said, raising Woodsman’s aim up. The laser moved from his forehead and disappeared into the sky.

“‘After all’? Come on, I was looking forward to see your jaw drop, what’s with that cool attitude? What a letdown, you’re hurting my feelings here. —But when did you realize, traveler?” Gene asked, pointing his finger straight out. Kino answered,

“Just a while ago, really. Do you think a leader who would go so far as to use his followers as a shield would go about doing something as dangerous as ramming a motorrad into somebody?”

Gene stood there laughing, arms all akimbo.

“Hahaha! I see! That makes sense! Ahahaha!”

“I also considered the wife... but that option also disappeared. To challenge someone with no chance of winning—it’s either you’ve gone mad or someone you dread has given you a command that you can’t possibly defy.”

“Ahaha! You got it!”

“I like to ask you something.”

“What?”

“How old are you?”

“Er, twelve?”

“You don’t look it.”

“Hold it, I *am* physically twelve! —But indeed. I’ve lived ninety-three years already.”

“I knew it... Next question. How?”

Gene shrugged.

“Dunno really. I wanna know the answer myself. Growing up normally until twelve, then suddenly ceasing to age altogether. Have you ever seen anyone like that in your journey?”

“No. You’re the first one I’ve met. Honestly... I was surprised. The world’s really such a big place,” Kino replied with a shake of the head and almost no change in expression. A look of disappointment swept through Gene.

“I see.... No matter, I’ve given up on maturing physically a long time ago. If you look like a kid, there are all sorts of things you can do that only a kid can pull off. Like fooling people, for one.”

“Where did you come from?”

“It’s incredibly far from here. Maybe it still exists, I don’t really know.”

“What kind of country was it?”

Gene knitted his eyebrows together.

“You’re asking some strange questions. —Let’s see... it’s an ordinary country. But I’m not really sure what it is exactly that makes it ‘ordinary’. It’s stable and peaceful, and generally a nice place to live in. I lived there with my parents until I was sixteen.”

“ ... ”

“With me like this, my parents covered up for me. They tried their best to protect me, but people are bound to notice. When they could no longer stand it, they were forced to take me with them to a journey... But it was not something they’re used to, and soon they died. I was left all alone ever since.”

“I see.... I think that’s enough stories for me. Thanks.”

With a word of gratitude, Kino bowed a little and proceeded to stow away Woodsman’s silencer into one pouch, then installed Woodsman back to its holster.

“Kino, what are you gonna do?” Hermes asked.

“Lifting you up right away.”

“Sweet! —Then, what’s next?”

“Let’s wrap things up. If you’re not broken anywhere, let’s get out of here immediately.”

“I’m fine, I think.”

“Let’s get the luggage I hid along the way, and make a run for the walls. Then we leave.”

“Understood!”

Gene interrupted the conversation.

“Hey, I’ve got one—”

“I refuse,” Kino answered without even hearing the end of his sentence.

“I’m not even finished yet!”

“I know. You’re going to ask if I could let you ride with me, right? I refuse.”

“Wha—! You won’t kill me and you won’t take me with you either! What a demon!”

“I don’t really get why, but let’s leave it at that.”

Kino turned away from Gene and walked towards Hermes.

Gene followed, and asked Kino from behind.

“Did you know that the police used you?”

“I imagine so.”

“Otherwise, there’s no way they could have allowed you to walk freely with that much ammunition and explosives. And you need to have some form of transportation to get here.”

“That may be true.”

“But do you know? —Part of our group’s earnings go to that office in the form of a bribe.”

“Really? —Hm, that sounds plausible.”

“Then how about this? The mechanic of that repair shop voluntarily handed out Hermes to our members. They wanted to make it look as if he was stolen, but the truth is a thick wad of cash has found its way to his breast pocket.”

“Is that so? —Well, that does seem likely. But now that I got Hermes back, and in perfect condition no less, it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

“Hmph! What a bore!”

Kino turned over May’s unconscious body, and tied together her thumbs light enough so as not to restrict the blood flow.

And Bob, whose bleeding was not so serious, had only his feet tied up.

“Once news of these ‘mystery’ corpses comes out, the police will come up with some explanation or another pinning it to the group. It’s all over. Well, these two have been quite useful while it lasted.”

After hearing Gene’s somewhat downcast remark, Hermes, who was finally stood upright by Kino, asked. “Hey founder, how long have you been sticking around with these two?”

“Maybe two years or so?”

“What started it?”

“That time, I was pretty loaded, so these crooks thought they could con their way to my money. They were traveling swindlers from the very beginning, you see. But instead I was the one who convinced them. If they worked with a mere child, they thought they could profit more. I’ve been in this country many times

before, so I know a lot about it. In the end, we came to this country with the seeds of that narcotic grass.”

“And did you make money after all?”

“The donations of our followers were a big sum you know? But later on, we got the proceeds from selling the drugs. Bob, May, and I were planning to run off with it all after earning a certain amount. It was hidden all over but—I know! You wait! There’s cash and gold and silver too!”

“Wow! Kino! You just grabbed mullet in the highlands!” Hermes cried out happily, while Kino, who was stooped over checking Hermes, replied with a shake of the head.

“‘Millet in wet hands’? —No, I’m not really interested.”

“Oh.” “Oh.”

Hermes and Gene said together.

And then Hermes alone added, “Yes, that’s it!” then fell silent.

“My only goal was to get Hermes back. Not the money.”

“Good grief. Then that money will immediately get confiscated by the police. But half will end up in the pockets of that deputy chief and his cronies. Not only that, but they also got rid of our group. They definitely hit two birds with one stone,” Gene said.

“I guess that’s true.”

“What’s with you! You’ve known from the start and just let everyone get away? I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but that shopkeeper, the police, that couple—every single one in this country is a bad person!”

“Yes. And the same goes for you, and me.”

“That’s a blunt way of saying it. —But you can’t be that bad, right? You killed only because you wanted your motorrad back.”

After confirming that Hermes was not damaged or out of shape, Kino stood up, faced Gene and approached him.

“No,” Kino said, crouching to meet Gene’s eyes at the same level. “I am a very

bad person.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and as proof—”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll silence you, who knew everything that happened here. —And I’ll leave you behind. You’re free to do whatever you want from here on.”

Kino landed a fist on Gene’s gut.

Gene collapsed with a groan.

But a pleasant smile lingered on his face.

— —

Kino and Hermes departed as soon as they arrived at the gates early in the morning.

They rode slowly inside the forest under the sun that was beginning to show itself in a sky that was clear of clouds.

“Dear, dear. That was quite a pinch you’ve got yourself into,” Hermes said, as if it had nothing to do with him.

“Well everything turned out all right in the end. You got fixed too, Hermes.”

“All’s well that ends well! That mechanic was a pretty great guy too!”

“If we set aside his character.”

Kino went on while straddling atop Hermes, whose left handlebar is now filled with scratches.

“Even so—” Kino chuckled. “For you to talk about the ‘truth’ of this world...”

“Why of course! I’ll talk about anything if you ask!”

“Well let’s hear it then. What will become of Gene from now on?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Hermes replied readily.

“Oh?”

“Until the day he dies, he’ll remain like that physically, and also keep on living

the way he had. Gene, like that country, will stay the same.”

“I see... I’m glad to hear that one ‘truth’.”

“So why not show some more spirit, Kino?”

Kino grinned and replied, “I *am* spirited. —Now, I wonder what kind of country’s next?”

“Who knows?”

Kino and Hermes rode through the forest.

第十四話

「私達の国」
—Welcome!—



Chapter 14: “Our Country” —Welcome—

“Kino and Hermes, we welcome you! Please enjoy your stay in our country!”

It was quite a young guide that welcomed Kino and Hermes upon their entrance through the gates.

—

With cobblestone walls that housed less than a thousand souls, it was a very tiny country situated at the heart of a valley in a vast mountainous region. Kino and Hermes were given permission to enter the country after answering a few questions.

[Did you come from a nearby country?]

[Have you visited this country in the past ten years?]

[Have you met a person who has visited this country in the past ten years?]

Questions like these. Kino and Hermes both answered no to all of them.

It was just the end of fall.

The trees in the mountains surrounding the country were beginning to show their autumn colors, painting a vivid mosaic underneath the clear blue sky.

—

“Now, let me be your guide through this place!”

The guide wore a knitted fur hat and plain, patchy clothing, and was bedecked with a beautiful red stone pendant that stood out all the more against the sober hue of the shirt beneath it.

Together with this guide, Kino and Hermes toured the country.

Kino went around pushing the luggage-free Hermes through the small country’s understandably narrow roads. Even a slight slope would make him too heavy to push, so only then did Kino start the engine to carefully make the uphill climb.

Inside the country was a stretch of green land.

The gentle slopes served as pastures, where furred animals with very long necks grazed. The guide went on to explain,

“You see over there? Those are the most important animals in this country. We make clothes from their sheared fur. They don’t really have a name, so we only refer to them as ‘animals’.”

“‘Alpaca’, right? I think that’s what they’re called elsewhere,” Hermes said.

“Is that so? That’s great! I’ll tell everyone about it.” The guide’s eyes sparkled.

Kino and Hermes were also shown around the farmlands.

There were steep slopes that gradually turned into fields grown with grain and vegetables. Even at that time, a great crowd of adults with several children mixed in were hard at work in the fields.

When Kino and Hermes passed by, they were stared at like objects of curiosity, but soon the people smiled and waved at them.

Houses were built along both sides of the river that flowed across the country. They seemed to be sturdy structures, built with big stones piled together.

“During winter, we get heavy snow that always ends up into a snowstorm. All winter long, we could only hole up inside our houses and wait for spring to arrive.”

The guide explained further.

At any rate, the harsh winters mean that they are busiest during this season. If the autumn harvest was not enough, they would have to give up their precious alpacas.

“Must be tough,” Hermes commented, encouraging the young guide to ask in return.

“How do you go about traveling during winter?”

Kino answered.

As much as possible, they go to warm regions where there’s no snow.

And only when they could not avoid wintry regions, they would stay in some

country for a long time, and move out once the weather becomes warmer.

“I see... So everyone goes through hard times. Once, we also had to overcome an ordeal much harsher than winter.”

“Ho, what sort of ordeal? Care to share?” Hermes asked.

“Of course! Until ten years ago, we were only a group of travelers. At that time, our faraway homeland exceeded its population limit, and the citizens who had no assets were deemed ‘outcasts’ and banished from the country. Over a thousand people were forced to become wanderers,” answered the guide, whose smile never flickered away.

“That’s just like Kino!”

“Yes. That’s why I can totally relate! Until I was eight, I also lived the life of a traveler. It was never fun, hunting and gathering while being on the move. Even now, we had to work in order to live. But it was much worse back then.”

“I get what you mean.”

“But ten years ago, we found this country!”

“I see— So, you were allowed to immigrate here?”

“No. We were permitted to stay for just one hour. But the people who lived in this country ten years ago were very kind. They allowed the young children—that includes me—to enter the walls, and they gave us shelter. Even though they barely had enough to spare, they also shared food with the adults outside the walls.”

“Right. And so, in the course of ten years, everyone eventually became citizens of the country?”

“No. That’s not possible because there’s too many of us. This country was nowhere near wealthy enough to maintain their population, and ours. Soon, we had to leave and go traveling again.”

“Eh? Then what happened?”

“We decided to take over this country! The children attacked and killed the gatekeepers all at once, then opened the gates from the inside. I was able to kill one myself! This pendant belonged to that person! I claimed it for myself as a

reward. So, once the gates were opened, the adults waiting outside attacked all together and killed every single one who lived here!”

“I see! And then?”

“After killing everyone, we were able to stay in this country! We finally found the home we so desired! And for the past ten years, we lived simple but happy lives here! And so it shall ever be!”

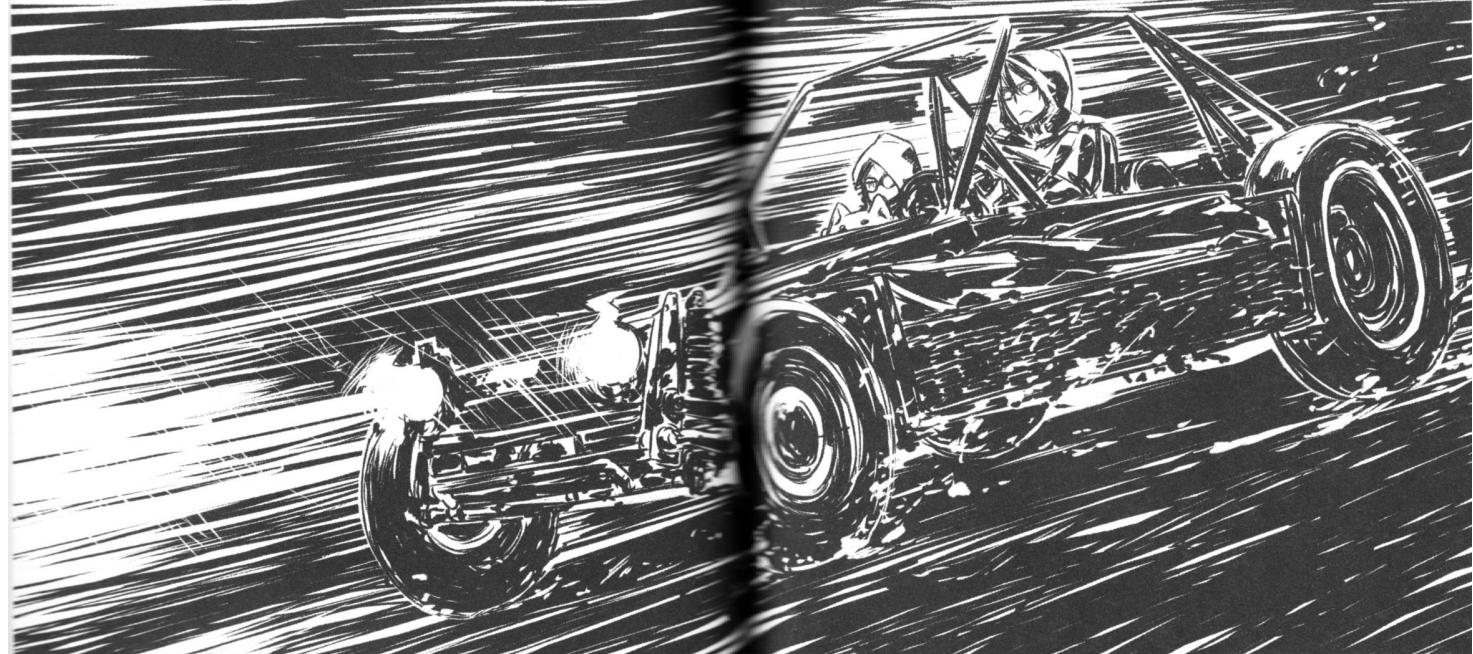
The young woman said, her face graced with a smile free from all worries.

“Kino and Hermes, we welcome you! Please enjoy your stay in our country!”

エピソード

「渡す国・a」

— Messengers・a —



**Epilogue: "Land of Passage ▪ a" —
Messengers ▪ a—**

SCENE FROM THE
「LAND OF PASSAGE-B」
FRONTISPIECE.



SORRY. IN THE AFTERWORD FOR THE
LAST VOLUME, I SAID I'D PUT ARABIC
NUMBERS ON THE COVER, BUT THEN I
SENT THE DRAFT DATA WITHOUT THE
NUMBER IN IT. TEHEPERO!!
-KUROBOSHI KOKUHAKU.

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, fluffy fur. My face makes me look as if I'm always happy and smiling, but that doesn't mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Traveling with us is Ti. She's a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, who has been part of our team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

We ran through the forest.

As usual, the buggy's engine noise echoed out in fine form.

It didn't get regular maintenance, aside from the occasional oil change, but the previous owner must have been excellent. I'd never seen it break down.

The buggy, which had failed to die in the war, continued to move without fail every day, as if it were working hard to help bring Master Shizu, who had failed to die in his homeland, to new places.

Here in this vast forest, the trees were tall and the land was flat.

The road was endless and straight, cutting through the forest and out to the horizon.

It was the middle of spring.

The weather was warm in the daytime, but the mornings and nights were still cold. Ti would often hang onto me for a while after waking up at dawn and getting out of her warm sleeping bag.

It was midday.

The sunlight streaming down from the cloudless sky was warm. Blended with the wind from the buggy's movement, the temperature on our skin was comfortable.

Master Shizu was wearing his sweater, like always, with goggles on his face

and the steering wheel in his grasp.

Ti was wearing her usual shorts and long-sleeved shirt. I always wondered if her legs got cold, but in the buggy, she's always squeezed up against me from my spot in front of the passenger seat, so I guess she was alright.

The sight of the trees flowing past us on either side was the same as it had been for the last three days. It was hard to tell if we were actually moving. It was frightening, just how large this forest was.

We'd heard that there was a country ahead, and a fairly large one, at that, so we kept on running. Large countries have a tendency to be more accepting of strangers.

We were on a journey in search of somewhere Master Shizu and Ti could live in peace.

Just how far had we traveled from that beach where Master Shizu's blood was spilled?

Would this unspeaking buggy would keep turning its engine until them?

These sorts of questions sprung to mind from time to time.

—

We ran on through the unchanging scenery, and we finally came across the country we were searching for that night.

The border wall stretched out, nearly in a straight line (at least, it appeared to). The country was gigantic. Neither I nor Master Shizu had ever come across a country this big before.

The sun was sinking past the wall. Many countries wouldn't permit entry after nightfall, so Master Shizu hurried to knock on the gate.

Soon, we received permission to enter. They said to ask about immigration at the town hall. No surprises, just the usual pattern.

We passed through the gate and the strikingly vast countryside spread into view.

The wall to the west wasn't visible at all.

The forest had been cleared and cultivated by human hands. That is, there were farms, meadows, and some woodland that had been kept as windbreaks.

The twilight was a beautiful orange, tinged with red.

The green landscape was dyed in vivid color under the sky, which dissolved into deep indigo, painting a magical scene.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Master Shizu had delayed setting off in the buggy, staying in the open space past the gate to enjoy the scenery. And also to show it to Ti.

We sat, idly watching the sunset.

"Ah! It's going to set!"

A female voice.

"You can still make it, so don't panic. Just keep at it."

A clear, male voice, slightly high.

But I could tell. The second voice wasn't human.

Rather, it was a motorrad's (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle. Just note that it cannot fly).

A girl came through, pushing along a motorrad through a small side-door, next to the gate we'd come through.

She looked to be about 16 or 17 years old. Her black hair was tied behind her head, and she wore a helmet.

The motorrad was an extremely compact model. Its body was red and rectangular, with two small wheels. I suppose it was one of those peculiar types with collapsible handlebars, so it could be loaded and carried in a car.

It was my first time seeing a motorrad since seeing Kino's partner. They're quite rare.

"Oho? Now that's a rare sight," the motorrad said.

Master Shizu? Ti? The buggy? No, I knew.

"It's a dog, Photo."

He meant me.

The girl that the motorrad called Photo said, "A dog? Ohh... But you can't do that Sou. Don't say it like it's weird to see."

Well now, how polite.

"It's fine. I'm sure they're thinking, 'That's a rare sight,' too."

That was true. It was mutual.

Photo pushed Sou a little distance past us.

"We have to hurry."

She removed her helmet, setting it on the ground, and then began setting up the large camera that hung from her neck.

It was a single lens camera, the kind used by pros. A rare item that wasn't fitting for a teenage girl to have.

But Photo flipped through the settings with practiced motions, as if it were a part of her body, and peered through the viewfinder at the landscape.

"Nice huh, nice huh. Beautiful, huh. The sun, is shining."

Muttering strangely, she pressed down on the shutter.

The sun sank below the horizon.

Satisfied with the picture, I suppose, Photo let the camera hang back down and turned to face us.

"Hello, travelers. Welcome to our country!"

She gave a brisk nod of her head.

Master Shizu responded, "Thank you. It's a beautiful country, isn't it?"

"The sunset at this time of year is especially pretty! It's great from the top of the wall, but it's also lovely down from the ground level."

I see. I suppose they were up on the wall earlier, and they just came down. There must be an elevator or something. That small motorrad could probably go up and be ridden on top of the wall.

"Are you travelers on a trip?"

Master Shizu answered Photo's question, "No, we're trying to immigrate. We're hoping this country is accepting of strangers."

"Oh! Then you'll be fine!" Photo's face broke into a grin. "I was the same! I became a citizen last summer."

"Oh?" Master Shizu's interest was piqued. That was valuable information.

Photo got his drift, I suppose, and continued explaining, "I was alone, well no, I was with Sou, and we were wandering around, looking for someplace to live. The people here were kind and willing to accept us."

Sou chimed in with more information, "You can only apply for citizenship at the capital city, but any place big enough to be called a 'city' will have a town hall with an information desk to discuss immigration. You can probably go check tomorrow. There's an inn for travelers near there that I'd suggest you stay for tonight."

"Thank you. That's a big help. Do you live close by?"

"No. We live pretty far away. We're on a photography trip, so next, we'll be going to take pictures of the stars. We have a truck."

Photo pointed as she spoke, and there certainly was a blue truck parked where she indicated. On the side, there was the name and address of some photography studio.

So I suppose this girl was managing a photography studio at such a young age.

I didn't know her past, but taking into consideration how she even had a motorrad, she seemed quite unique.

"I see. Thank you for the information. If we have the chance, I hope you'll let us visit your shop."

"Yes! Ah, I know! Please let me take one of you! It'll be a commemorative photo for you when you visit!"

That took Master Shizu by surprise. Me too.

It's a bit hard to say this, but Master Shizu and I had never had our picture taken. Ti either. A chance like this didn't come around too often.

"Thank you. Please do, then," Master Shizu replied.

—

The morning of the day after entering the country.

Resting in a real bed after such a long time helped heal the weariness of traveling. Ti didn't seem to care either way, though.

Master Shizu was a little pushy in making Ti take a shower, with me assigned to watch over her. On the road, it was fine to do the bare minimum in staying clean, so daily showers were a luxury.

Breakfast at the inn included fresh fruit, eggs, and bread, and the room was lively.

However, this was breakfast "for visitors," not necessarily something that everyone in the country could afford to eat. We'd have to be on the lookout for things like that.

After breakfast, we rode the buggy to the town hall nearby. However, it was a big country, so even though I say it was "nearby," it still took us some time.

Master Shizu was doing his best to drive safely.

We might try to apply for citizenship soon, so we couldn't afford to drive too fast and get in trouble with the police. The roads had signs for the speed limit (it was 1km/hour here), so we drove while making sure not to go over.

As we plodded along, I studied the country's condition.

From what I saw, there was no public disturbance (there were some countries we had been to that were in the middle of dealing with terrorism or civil war), there was no huge wealth gap, and there were signs for elections and politicians, so it didn't seem to be a dictatorship, at least.

As for their level of technology, they weren't yet at the point where everyone had a car. I still saw plenty of people riding on horses or in carriages drawn by horses.

The girl from yesterday, Photo, had settled here, and the country seemed stable in terms of politics and finance. I couldn't see a reason not to hope to immigrate. Of course, there was no way to tell what might happen in the future.

Anyway, as a result of our careful driving, it was close to noon by the time we reached the local office, where Master Shizu asked about applying to immigrate. What did we need to do to become citizens?

It was right before lunchtime, but the government official was polite about answering.

In short, applying was possible.

However, the law had changed this year, and just submitting the paperwork wasn't enough to get approved.

You needed to set up a half-year-long probationary period and get approval to stay that long.

The condition was that in that time, you had to search for work and a place to live in order to build a foundation for long-term residence. That is, work seriously and live seriously.

Of course, it didn't even need to be stated that breaking the law during that time was out of the question.

Master Shizu smiled, "Just what I wanted."

—

Master Shizu moved quickly to strike while the iron was hot.

First, we headed toward the capital, in the heart of the country. We made it there in the middle of the night and found a place to stay.

The next day, he headed to the national library.

Master Shizu set out to read all of the country's history books from end to end. On a sidenote, he left his sword at the inn.

Meanwhile, Ti and I stayed behind at the inn. That said, Master Shizu had given me an assignment. Which was to listen to the radio.

Television hadn't been invented in this country yet, but there were radio broadcasts.

Ti and I listened to the radio all day long. Well, I don't know if Ti enjoyed it, but, "... " she was silent as usual, and she listened to it without showing signs of

boredom or dozing off. She didn't offer her opinions, so I don't know what they were.

At night, Master Shizu returned. He seemed very happy; I suppose his efforts in the library might have been rewarding. His dream of becoming a citizen might even come true. It wasn't impossible.

"This country is certainly worth living in. Tomorrow, let's go apply," Master Shizu said.

"..." Ti was her usual self.

Did she agree? Did she disagree? Did she not care either way? I guessed that it was probably the last option.

—

The next day. Our fourth day in this country.

Master Shizu brought Ti and me along to apply for citizenship.

Various documents were read to Master Shizu, and once he consented, he was able to apply.

Master Shizu had reached the age of adulthood, by this country's standards, and he was named Ti's guardian. I didn't need any sort of special permission. Well, I am a dog, after all.

After submitting all of the paperwork, we were required to find a place to live and work, but Master Shizu already had a goal in mind.

It seemed that many of the youths in this country had moved away from the farms to go work in the city.

As a result, there was a shortage of farmhands. Villages like that had a surplus of extra rooms and a need for young workers, so they were offering sponsored housing.

I wasn't sure whether he'd be able to change occupations after he became a citizen, but Master Shizu had gone to visit a farmers' association and asked them to find a village that matched his criteria (one man, one girl, one dog, and one buggy, with housing).

I was wondering whether it would really be so easy for them to find — and then they found one.

Located about half a day's car ride from the capital, there was a farming and foresting village in the hills that was looking to recruit a young man.

"Then it's decided," Master Shizu decided, without a moment's hesitation.

—

The next day. Fifth day in the country.

We checked out of the inn early in the morning and departed with an atlas of the country and a letter of introduction.

We drove carefully through the rural area, and we arrived at our destination in the afternoon.

It was a quiet village.

It covered a lot of land though. The farmland and mountains seemed to stretch on forever. Houses dotted the vast green land, and horse-drawn carriages and small trucks plodded along.

We arrived at the village office. It appeared to be the only one, on a road lined with houses.

There, we met the elderly village head, and Master Shizu handed over the immigration application, which served as proof of identification, and the letter of introduction.

Would they really accept suspicious (no offense) strangers in a little village like this?

I wondered anxiously, for a moment.

"Ahh, excellent. Nice to meet you. Alright then, let me show you the house!"

Just like that, they accepted us.

It was hospitable, even.

—

And so began our life in the village.

The log house we rented had been used by a farming family; it was old, but large. It had been thoroughly cleaned, down to the furniture. It was more than enough to be a "mansion" to us.

Master Shizu started working the next day.

Early each morning, they gathered into wagons and trucks, returning later that night.

It seemed that Master Shizu was working to help with farming and forestry. They lent him out to help out farmers and workshops that were short-handed.

One day, he did nothing but harvest vegetables. Another day, he worked to cut down as many trees as he could.

It was always long, strenuous labor, and it wasn't hard to imagine how tough it was, but —

"Today, I'm cleaning the irrigation ditches."

Master Shizu seemed cheerful every day when he left. Being able to be of use to someone was what made him happy.

He started eating twice as much as he had when we were traveling, and it seemed like he needed it.

As expected in a farming village, there was no shortage of food. I'm not sure whether they were presents or merely part of his payment, but every day, Master Shizu came home with a ton of vegetables, fruit, and eggs.

Now, as for Ti —

She wasn't really doing anything.

One day, she sat outside, not bored, but just relaxing and gazing up at the drifting clouds.

One day, she went for a walk with me in the woods nearby. The village was big enough that you could walk for an entire day without seeing anyone, and there were a lot unpaved "logging roads" in the mountains that were used by the foresters.

One rainy day, she stared at the country atlas, which was probably our only

reading material.

Master Shizu had tasked me with watching over Ti, but honestly, there was probably no reason to worry.

—

Seven days passed in the village, more than smoothly. It was our 12th day since entering the country.

Master Shizu was given his first day off.

He talked to Ti and me in our seats around the small breakfast table, "Ti, don't you want to go to elementary school? There's a truck in this village that collects the kids and takes them to school. It's from the morning to the afternoon. They teach lots of things, like reading and writing. You can learn a lot of things and make lots of friends your age."

Ti's reaction was, "..."

Master Shizu said, "Well, I just want you to think about it. It doesn't have to be every day, either; you can take it slow."

He made snap decisions, but he never forced the issue. That was that, and we moved on to a different topic.

"By the way, the buggy —"

Since we'd come to the village, our precious buggy hadn't been moved even once. It sat in the small shed next to the house, gathering dust.

"We've found a job and an address, so I was thinking about selling it."

"You can't! You definitely can't!"

Ti raised her voice for the first time in what I suppose was several days. She also jumped to her feet as she spoke.

"...I-is that so?" Master Shizu asked, wide-eyed and overpowered.

Wearing a face she'd never shown before, Ti glared at Master Shizu.

Well no, she was still about as expressionless as usual, but it felt like the look in her eyes was harsher.

I didn't particularly disagree with Master Shizu.

If the buggy had fulfilled its purpose, there was no reason to keep holding onto it forever. Even if we needed transportation, we didn't need something as high-performance as the buggy.

When we drove through town, we'd often have people talk to us, and it seemed like we could sell it for a fairly high price. Overall, it didn't seem like a bad idea.

Master Shizu didn't say it, but — it was obvious that he intended to put the profits from selling the buggy towards Ti's education.

I'm not sure whether she understood that, but —

"You definitely can't!" Ti repeated herself again, and then flopped back down in her seat.

"O-okay, then, I won't decide on it right now," Master Shizu said, and then returned to his breakfast.

—

Another ten days passed.

Life was going surprisingly smoothly.

Every morning, Master Shizu went off to work and came back smiling.

He'd tell us things like, "Today, everyone's working together to plow a large field," and "Today, everyone's setting up traps to keep the animals from getting into the fields."

Ti was, well, the same as ever.

I was starting to wonder. Things like, "Could it be that we'll continue to live in this country like this?"

I mean, it's not like I'd been thinking, "It'll go wrong this time too, won't it?" but we had had a long string of mistakes until now.

Then, on our 20th day in the village, our 25th day in the country —

Something happened.

—

That day.

It was further into the Spring, and it was much warmer. The weather forecast on the radio said that the region here would break into rain that night, but it wasn't noticeable yet and the weather was fine.

It was a day off, so Master Shizu and Ti were fishing in the nearby river.

The incredibly clear water flowed in a gentle stream. They cast out the long, thin rods they'd received from the villagers to catch the freshwater fish.

The end of the line was just a hook, sinker, and a feather floater.

We looked under rocks to find bugs to put on the hooks, casting them where the fish were, and waiting a little bit to catch them. The fish looked beautiful.

Nature was rich here, so the schools of fish were thick. Even Master Shizu, who wasn't especially good at fishing, managed to catch some, so there must be tons.

"Did you say something, Riku?"

Oh, nothing.

Ti caught several more, and because she loved fish so much, her eyes were glittering (that's what it looked like, at least).

There was more than enough to feed us, so Master Shizu and Ti spent all of the afternoon napping in the shade of a tree.

After passing the day in peace, we were on the road back to the house as night was beginning to fall, when a truck passed by us on the road.

"Ah! Shizu!" The middle-aged woman driving the truck called out to Master Shizu, "Something came up! Can you come to the meeting too?"

—

Without having a chance to stop at the house, we sat in the back of the rumbling truck with the various farm tools there and came to the village office.

Master Shizu (along with Ti and me, due to the circumstances) went into the meeting place.

The great hall in the village office — well, it wasn't actually all that great, but it contained a long table, with the village chief at the head and the other men and women from the village gathered around. They all wore bitter expressions.

"Ahh, Shizu. A bit of a situation came up."

A burly, sunburned middle-aged man quickly explained the situation to Master Shizu.

Apparently —

There was a manufacturer that wanted to build a waste disposal plant in the village. It would significantly lower the cost of transporting waste, since they had been dumping it outside the country until now.

Of course, this was a country with a government and laws. Waste disposal was regulated for environment protection reasons, so it wasn't a simple process. There might be plenty of countries that didn't care, but this country was more proper.

It wasn't as easy as having a disposal company buy the land and saying, "Okay, you can dump it here from now on." They needed the approval of the municipality, that is, the people living nearby.

There had been plans to build a disposal plant here for years now.

Of course, the villagers had refused. They hadn't even given permission for the company to buy the land. Besides the fact that they used the land for farming, they wanted to limit any possibility of tainting the soil and water.

That should have settled the issue.

However —

"They pulled a dirty trick..."

The waste disposal company used devious methods to deal with the villagers that wouldn't give them permission.

First, a different company bought the land. They claimed to be an "experimental farm" that wanted to try using the land for various farming methods and different kinds of produce. The village had no reason to refuse.

But that company soon applied for bankruptcy and sold the land again to a different buyer. That buyer being the waste disposal company, of course. That was the first part of the trick.

"But without everyone's approval, they can't build the waste plant, right?"

Master Shizu was right, but they had prepared more.

Without the villagers knowing, they sent an application to the town hall furthest from the village. In reality, it should have been sent to the administration offices in the capital, but because the country was so large, they accepted applications at the local offices so that the main office wouldn't be swamped.

So there was a bulletin posted in the town hall, several hundred kilometers away, saying "Please submit any objections within however many days," the villagers had no way of noticing.

It wasn't illegal, but it certainly lacked basic morality.

The deadline for submitting objections was tomorrow, at 8 in the morning. When the town hall opened.

So, how did the villagers learn about it in the first place? One of the officials at the town hall had gotten the date wrong by one day and called in to the village.

"Excuse me, there didn't seem to be any objections from your village, so I'm calling to report that the matter will be granted approval — Oh, I'm sorry, I'm off by a day. So forget what I said just now. I'll call again tomorrow."

Thanks to this official taking their job too seriously, the village learned about the situation.

And so they had held an emergency meeting right away.

Master Shizu, Ti, and I watched and listened from the foot of the table.

The village naturally wanted to raise an objection, but it could only be submitted with an official letter.

When they tried calling the town hall, "I'm sorry, but that's not permissible," so that hadn't resolved the issue.

The letter was being written right now, and would be finished by the time the sun set.

However, the villagers had no way of traveling the several hundred kilometers to the town hall before 8 in the morning.

"We'll just have to take a truck and gun it!" said someone.

"No good... You think you'd make it?" said someone else, explaining that it was physically impossible, by simply comparing a truck's top speed and the distance.

It was frustrating that the company's actions were shameless, but they weren't "illegal."

If they couldn't do anything, and permission was granted to the company, then they had the protection of "the license," and they could begin construction tomorrow if they wanted.

The villagers' mood hung in the air, heavy.

The possibility that a garbage dump might be built in this nature-rich, relaxed (despite the hard labor of farm work) village wrapped the atmosphere in gloom.

In the middle of this defeated, funeral-like mood —

"Then I will!" Master Shizu stood to his feet, drawing everyone's attention at once. "I'll go deliver the letter! Let's not give up until we've done everything we can!"

The village chief asked for everyone, "But I thought it was impossible to make it in time...?"

I knew what he was about to say, and Ti probably did as well.

Master Shizu replied, "My buggy can go more than twice as fast as your trucks. There's still a chance. I'll start preparing immediately. I especially need gasoline."

No one objected.

With a new, if faint, hope, the villagers' expressions eased up.

"Ah, also —"

As Master Shizu began to speak again, the villagers tensed a bit, wondering what he was about to say. Was he going to demand a reward or something?

Master Shizu continued, "We've got these buckets of fish, if anyone wants to take some home to eat."

—

If Ti hadn't objected at that time, the buggy might have been sold off already.

The engine was ignited for the first time in 20 days.

Master Shizu had his rain gear and goggles prepared, just like when we were traveling, and the buggy was headed towards the local office.

"..."

Ti was in the passenger seat, along with me.

"Are you sure you want to come along?" Master Shizu asked again.

"..." Ti just stared at Master Shizu, almost as if to say, "You don't need to ask all the time."

"Okay, got it..."

The buggy arrived at the local office, where they'd finished writing the letter.

The sun had already set, and a sudden increase of clouds darkened the sky even further.

It looked like a storm was imminent. The weather forecasts in this country were highly accurate — is what I thought, but I realized that actually, the country was just so huge that it was easy to report changes in the weather to other regions.

"Shizu... We're counting on you."

The village chief handed over the letter, sealed and placed in a tin.

Master Shizu took it carefully and fastened it securely under the buggy's seat (it was almost enough to make you think, "Is it really necessary to go that far?")

The clock hand had moved past 22. We had less than 10 hours remaining.

Master Shizu confirmed the town hall's location with the villagers.

It certainly was quite a distance, but with the buggy at full power, it wasn't impossible.

The road system in this country was well-maintained, and most of the major roads were paved with asphalt, but even in places where that wasn't the case, the roads were at least level.

We were given a hand-written road map, which Master Shizu placed in his breast pocket.

Some of the women from the village gave us water and fruit to eat along the way. The men supplied us with a tank of fuel that they had siphoned from their trucks.

Our preparations were all in good order.

Master Shizu started the engine. He put on his goggles. It was like we were traveling, but he didn't have his sword at his side.

Ti clung to me and hugged my neck, and almost as if that was the signal, the buggy set off.

At the same time, the rain began to fall.

—

When we were traveling, Master Shizu almost never drove fast.

That was only sensible, after all. Driving at dangerous speeds on a road where you didn't know what might lie ahead was plain foolish. Also, it was worse for gas mileage.

Now he was doing the opposite.

Master Shizu was pushing the buggy — now lighter without any luggage — to go as fast as possible.

Naturally, we were going quite a bit over the speed limit, but there were no police out on the farm roads in the middle of the night and the rain.

The buggy's headlights, which we didn't usually need, cut through the empty blackness, shining as if they were happy to be used.

The rain increasing in intensity. The buggy had no roof. Naturally, the two of

them were drenched. They both wore raingear and goggles, but their faces were soaked.

I didn't mind, but —

"..."

Well, it didn't look like Ti minded either.

I suppose Master Shizu felt enough at ease, even driving at this speed, because he began talking to Ti.

"Ti, it's great that you told me not to sell the buggy back then. Thank you."

"Mm." She stared ahead, responding with only a single word, no, a single syllable.

The rain was thick, but our progress was steady. It was warm enough outside that having a wet face didn't leave a chill.

There were a lot of curves in the road, winding around mountains, but they weren't sharp, so they weren't difficult to navigate.

In some ways, the night was even a bit helpful. If there was any oncoming traffic, we'd see their lights. But in reality, we didn't pass by anyone.

Looking at the buggy's clock and odometer, Master Shizu commented, "Ah, the date just changed. — But we might actually arrive sooner than we expected."

As he spoke calmly, he eased on the accelerator a little for safety.

"Stop."

Master Shizu noticed at the same time Ti spoke.

"Hold on!" Master Shizu shouted, as he suddenly pushed on the brake. Master Shizu and Ti were fine, since they were held in place by seatbelts, but since I was down in the narrow legroom of the passenger seat, I was pushed awkwardly into the buggy's frame.

The buggy's tires slid as it came to a stop.

We were in the middle of a gentle, right turn in the road. The heavy rain poured down on our buggy frame and rain gear.

"What a mess..."

There was a truck wreck.

Two large trucks were stopped in the road, completely blocking it off. Furthermore, both trucks had been burned down.

They were missing their tires and canopies, with only the black frames illuminated in the buggy's headlights, towering eerily over us.

For a moment, I wondered if it was the scene of a terrible traffic accident, but —

"This was on purpose, wasn't it..." Master Shizu said.

I see. There was no sign that the trucks had collided; they had just been neatly stopped in the road without a gap.

Basically —

"The people from that company found out that the we learned a day too early, and they put up a barricade just in case. This is the only road out of the village, after all."

It was exactly as Master Shizu said.

Master Shizu climbed out of the buggy and studied the situation.

It looked like whoever set this up was long gone; there was no sign of them around. There was no smoke coming from the trucks, so the fire must have been set a while ago.

Master Shizu said, "Yeah, it doesn't look like anyone's around."

He'd walked around to the other side of the trucks and back.

Also, he knew it was impossible, but he tried pushing them. They didn't budge whatsoever.

The tires had been burned away, and the exposed wheels were sunken into the melted asphalt. It didn't look possible to move without having heavy machinery.

"Should we explode it?" Ti asked.

It was an attractive idea — but we hadn't brought grenades or any other explosives with us. Master Shizu had even left his sword behind.

The trees were thick on either side of the road, so there was no room for the buggy to pass through.

Master Shizu returned to the buggy's driver seat, pulling out a small light and checking the road map.

If we tried to get the town hall without taking this road —

"No good, huh..."

It was impossible, unless we backtracked all the way to our starting point and took a different road. No matter how you looked at it, it was an unreasonable detour, and it was clear that we wouldn't make it in time.

"..." Master Shizu clenched and bared his teeth.

Master Shizu didn't do anything wrong, but he was probably thinking of how to apologize to the villagers.

"..." Master Shizu said nothing.

"..." Ti said nothing, but looked at him.

Just as I was wondering whether we'd be sleeping at home tonight —

"Let's go back a little," Ti said.

"Hm? — Ti, what'd you say?" Master Shizu asked in reply.

"Let's go back a little. Road on the left."

"Huh? There's no road —"

"There is."

"..."

Master Shizu put the buggy in reverse and turned it around. We started heading back down the road.

It was too dark to see clearly, but I didn't remember seeing any other roads. If there were, it would have been clearly marked by a sign with the name and distance for the next village.

After the buggy had been running for some dozen seconds, "Stop. Road on the right," Ti said.

Master Shizu stepped on the brake.

Master Shizu and I both looked to our right.

There was no sign there. But —

"Ahh... I see."

There was a road. Off the paved road, there as an unpaved logging road heading into the forest.

But it was a small, narrow entrance, only wide enough for a single vehicle. I was impressed by how surprisingly sharp Ti's eyesight was.

That's what I thought, but I was wrong.

"I remembered it. If we take this, we can pass through the mountains," Ti said.

Master Shizu asked to confirm, "So this path connects back to this road, right? You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I remember."

"..." Master Shizu was as quiet as Ti.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

So when Ti had looked at the country atlas out of boredom, she'd memorized all of the roads.

The logging roads were only dotted lines on the atlas. What's more, they wound through mountain ranges and repeatedly broke off into complex branches.

She memorized them, and that's how she was able to assert that taking this path would bring us around the barricade.

I remembered now. I think Master Shizu probably did too.

On that "Ship Country," when Ti guided us around.

That three-dimensional maze of dark, narrow spaces that a single person

could barely fit through.

For Ti, who memorized and moved with ease through all of that, memorizing a complex two-dimensional map of roads —

It was probably literal child's play for her.

For a regular person, that kind of recollection ability was far beyond incredible.

I wondered, "If Ti was given a chance to finish her education, what kind of person would she end up being?" But that wasn't important right now.

"Okay! Ti! Guide us!" Master Shizu raised his voice in excitement.

Ti gave a deep nod as the buggy turned to the right in the pouring rain and shot off onto the unpaved logging road.

The ground was wet and easy to slip on. There were puddles here and there, and large boulders that rumbled as they rolled.

The buggy ran through it, almost as if it was "just like all the roads we've been on before." It ran at a speed that had probably never been seen on the path before.

Through the pitch-black forest, only illuminated where the headlights shined,

"Right soon."

"Left there."

"Straight."

Ti gave accurate instructions several seconds before each fork in the road. And it wasn't just the forks.

"Left there, sharp turn."

She even gave instructions like that when there was a dangerously sudden turn.

Every time, Master Shizu only replied with "Roger!" as he spun the steering wheel, but under his goggles, his face bore a cheerful smile.

I had nothing to do except sit below the passenger seat and do my absolute

best to deal with the shaking, as I moved from side to side, and occasionally up and down.

—

With Ti's accurate navigation and Master Shizu's driving skills, it took three hours to pass through the puzzle-like woodland path.

It definitely took longer than it would have been on a normal road. It was certainly much faster than going all the way back and starting over, but it was still a significant time loss.

After we reached the paved road, Master Shizu said, "Thank you, Ti. Now then..." and sped off, without holding back.

On the straight road through the fields, the buggy ran as fast as possible. It wouldn't make it in time otherwise.

I suppose at that point, Ti felt she had nothing more to do, because she was fast asleep, her breathing sounding comfortable even as the wind and rain continued to wail against the passenger seat.

The rain finally began to let up as the dawn was starting to break.

As it got brighter, Master Shizu increased the speed even more.

Eventually, the rain stopped entirely.

The sky grew brighter and the sun was close to rising.

The morning mist hung over the tranquil scenery as the buggy roared and darted on through.

I thought the scenery was quite picturesque, but I wasn't able to think that for long.

"Ah, this might be bad..." Master Shizu grumbled.

As if on command, Ti woke up.

"What's the matter, Master Shizu?" I asked.

"Next to that hut we just passed. I think that was a police car..."

Oh boy.

Master Shizu and I both hoped he was mistaken, but Master Shizu's eyesight was excellent.

It was visible in the side-view mirror, behind the buggy. Much to our chagrin, it was a patrol car, blue lights flashing.

"Sorry, but... You'll have to be mad at us later."

Master Shizu didn't let up on the accelerator. However, the patrol car was quite fast.

I suppose the patrol car was going about the same speed as the buggy, because the distance between us didn't change much. Even worse, they had backup.

Right now, they were probably calling other officers with a radio. Since it was still early in the morning, we could only pray that there weren't too many diligent cops on the force.

After the car chase continued for a while, our bad hunch turned out to be right.

"Ahh..." Master Shizu gave a sigh.

Straight ahead of us on the road that stretched out toward the horizon, we could see flashing blue lights. There were three cars facing us, blockading the street.

"What do we do? Blow them away?" Ti, who had woken up at some point, asked.^[1] Like I said, though, we didn't have any explosives with us.

"There's no need for that," Master Shizu replied, as he looked at the clock and the odometer.

There wasn't much time or distance left. We had no time to stop. We knew that if we were stopped, it wouldn't be over with just a traffic ticket.

"..." Master Shizu was silent. It was only a tiny amount of time, but I'm sure he was worrying about all kinds of things.

"Aw man," Master Shizu said, grinning.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure," Master Shizu replied.

"Sure," Ti agreed.

With things like this, we knew what to do.

The lush green fields spread out to either side of the road.

Master Shizu sped straight towards the patrol cars blocking off the road, slowing down before we reached them and pretending to cooperate with the policemen gesturing for us to stop —

"I'm sorry, farmers!"

Apologizing to no one in particular, Master Shizu spun the wheel to the right. The buggy drove off the road and down a slope.

The buggy was fine, because it had long suspension, but a regular car would pitch forward on the decline and that would be the end of that.

The buggy bounced several times down the the meter-long slope and flew into the barley field.

And as we trampled the wheat splendidly beneath us, we continued on through the field. The barley stalks rained into the buggy like a storm.

"Yo!"

Master Shizu pulled the wheel left. As he did, he pushed down harder on the accelerator.

The buggy shot out of the field, climbed back up the hill, and jumped at its peak.

The landing made the frame creak, and the buggy was back on the road.

Behind us, I'm sure the policemen were panicking, trying to get back into their patrol cars.

"Ahh, so this is what it's like to be a felon..." Master Shizu said.

At the same time, the sun rose.

—

The buggy made a full-out sprint for the remaining distance.

Luckily for us, I suppose there were no other patrol cars that were around to ambush us, and we didn't run into any other obstacles along the road.

With the four police cars chasing behind and the mud-caked frame illuminated in the morning sun, the buggy flew like the wind.

When we arrived at the town hall, it was 7:49.

The town hall wasn't open for business yet, but there were people there and the entrance was open.

The buggy, now decorated with mud and barley stalks, came to a sudden halt outside the door, with a driver who looked distressed and dirtied in the same way. It must have been quite a surprise for the young woman who was cleaning there.

Master Shizu took off his rain coat and disappeared into the building, carrying the tin with the letter.

Immediately after, the patrol cars surrounded the buggy, with their shrill sirens blaring.

The police officers came out in unison.

"You're under arrest! Don't resist!" they shouted, as they surrounded the buggy. Some of them were pointing persuaders at the vehicle.

From the passenger seat, Ti grumbled, "Blow them away?"

It's definitely a good thing we didn't bring any explosives.

—

Right after Master Shizu submitted the letter, he was arrested.

Of course, he had finished what he came to do, so he didn't resist. He quietly settled into a patrol car so he wouldn't make trouble for the town hall.

"What happened, miss?" they asked me and Ti.

"..."

"Were you kidnapped by that man or something?"

"No."

I worried over how best to explain this while we were taken to the police station.

Our magnificent buggy was, of course, seized by the policemen.

Ti and I waited in a room together for a long time. Ti slept.

When it was almost noon, the police officers and Master Shizu came in together.

Master Shizu wore an upbeat expression on his face.

He said, "Alright, let's get ready to leave this country."

—

Two days later, we returned to the village to get our things.

That is, three days since we left the village and our 28th day since entering the country.

We weren't in our buggy, but rather in a police car as we traveled to the village.

The villagers had been informed of what had happened, and they were gathered outside "our house."

We were greeted with cheers and gratitude, while the cops were met with booing, making for a lively scene.

The village chief was the only one that was given a chance to speak with Master Shizu. I wasn't able to hear what passed between them.

We quickly gathered up our things, namely things like hand grenade and sword, and then we left our first home behind.

The villagers kept waving their hands at us as we were taken away in the police car.

"..."

Ti looked back at them from her seat until they were out of sight. She didn't wave.

—

The next day. The 29th day since we had come to the country.

The court decision was announced, and it was officially decided that we would be disposed of by banishment from the country.

Our dirty buggy was taken to the gate at the west end. I wasn't sure if it hadn't been seized as a simple mercy to us or if the villagers had made an appeal.

Once again, we were taken away with our belongings in a police car.

The news about the travelers hoping to immigrate that had gone wild in their high-performance buggy and run from the police for several hours before being arrested was apparently broadcast on the radio. However, they didn't explain our motive.

There were people here and there along the road that stared at us out of curiosity.

"..."

Ti was silent as she looked at them.

"..."

Then, Ti was silent as she looked at Master Shizu's calm expression in the driver seat.

—

Before we reached the western gate, we spent one night at an inn that the police had prepared.

Early the next morning, we were off.

It was exactly 30 days since we entered the country.

We were in front of the western gate, with no one else around.

Master Shizu finished the departure process and came back to the buggy.

Translator's Notes

1. [↑](#)

Yes, Riku noted when Ti woke up a few sentences ago. I'm just the

messenger.